

Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons and Top End Workforce Project to fix skills shortfall

Two Melbourne-based specialist plastic surgeons have been working in Darwin as part of a new initiative to address a plastic surgery skills shortage in the Northern Territory.

Dr Will Alexander and Mr Damien Grinsell were the first to volunteer for a two-year rolling roster of specialist plastic surgeons from across Australia. They are completing six-week to three-month stints at the Royal Darwin Hospital and Palmerston Regional Hospital.

The program was initiated by the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), which represents Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. It is working in partnership with the hospitals, and more broadly in regional Australia, is working to match specialty needs in public hospitals.

“We’ve been aware of the shortage of plastic surgeons in Darwin and have worked with Top End Health Service and senior surgeons at Royal Darwin and Palmerston hospitals to develop a COVID-19 Darwin Work Plan,” said ASPS Vice President Dr Nicola Dean.

Previously, the shortfall was met by a range of international practitioners and Australian locums.

“While sustaining the service for many years, we are keen to find a more permanent solution to ensure equity of access to specialist plastic surgery skills for the population of Darwin and surrounding areas,” Dr Dean said.

Executive Director of Integrated Surgical Services at Royal Darwin Hospital Mr Mahiban Thomas welcomed the partnership with the ASPS. “Specialist plastic surgeons are critical in the management of trauma, burns, cancer and reconstructive surgeries,” he said.

Mr Sabu Thomas, Director of General Surgery and Acting Director Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Royal Darwin Hospital, said, “It is heartening to note that ASPS and plastic surgeons outside the Territory are responding to the needs of people under the care of Royal Darwin Hospital.”

Dr Alexander operates at St Vincent’s, Royal Children’s and Monash hospitals

in Melbourne with a subspecialty interest in paediatric congenital hand microsurgery for children. He is looking forward to working across a broad scope of cases in Darwin including trauma, skin cancers, hand trauma and complex reconstructions, as well as the opportunity to work with the Indigenous community.

Mr Grinsell is a pioneer of perforator flaps used for microsurgical reconstruction of a range of complicated defects. “I have always been interested in giving back to the system that trained me,” he said.

For Dr Alexander and Mr Grinsell, the COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne was an added incentive to volunteer. Both relocated to Darwin with their families.

One of the first patients to benefit from the visiting surgeons was Justin Trezise, who had been on a waiting list for an operation to treat a venous malformation – a deep form of birthmark – that covered much of his calf. Mr Grinsell was able to perform a more complex surgery than Justin would otherwise have received, by excising and reconstructing the affected area with a free flap from his back.

“We already have around a dozen members who have indicated their willingness to participate in this program, particularly from the Melbourne area where many are being underutilised due to COVID-19-related restrictions,” Dr Dean said. “ASPS is pleased to have been able to assist with facilitating a reliable specialist workforce for Darwin and hopes this will lead to some longer-term commitments from surgeons to the area,” Dr Dean added. ■



Melbourne specialist plastic surgeons Mr Damien Grinsell and Dr William Alexander, with patient Justin Trezise, were the first volunteers to participate in a new program to address specialist skill shortages in the Top End.