



*“The girls would have died if we had left them in Indonesia, so we decided we would try and bring them back to Australia for surgery”*

## Caring for overseas communities

*A Hunter Valley Private Hospital nurse is working to improve healthcare in West Timor*

**K**errie Nicholls, a clinical nurse specialist at Hunter Valley Private Hospital (HVPH), will be working in a very basic theatre assisting in a dozen operations per day, working 14 hours at a stretch – but it will be the most rewarding thing she will do all year.

Early next year, the registered nurse from NSW will embark on her 10th trip to eastern Indonesia to share her skills with other health professionals to improve care for people living in communities in West Timor.

She first joined the now retired HVPH doctor Bob Sillar OAM on a trip to Indonesia in 2006 with the Overseas Surgical Specialist Association of Australia (OSSAA).

### **Benjola nurse**

While she has been involved in everything from toenail injuries to bowel resections,

one of the most common procedures Ms Nicholls assists in is thyroid surgery. She said there are a lot of people in West Timor with tumours. The locals call them “benjolan”.

This time around, she will catch up with two young women she met on a previous trip who captured her heart. When she was introduced to the teenagers three years ago, they had suffered with tumours.

“The girls would have died if we had left them in Indonesia, so we decided we would try and bring them back to Australia for surgery,” she said. “It will be wonderful to see how they are doing and what they are doing with their lives.”

The upcoming trip will be her fourth in a row to the Halilulik Hospital that is run by nuns. She will work with an OSSAA doctor, anaesthetist and interpreter. The word will be put out at Mass that the “benjola doctors” are coming.

Ms Nicholls said each time she goes back it is more rewarding. The staff have become like family. They are keen to learn and Ms Nicholls knows transferring skills to local staff members will result in ongoing and sustainable care for the community.

“The staff will grab our hands and eagerly show us what they have been able to do since we were there last,” she said.

“It is amazing to see them develop their skills and become talented theatre staff despite having so little to work with.”

She added, “It makes me appreciate the new theatres we have at HVPH, but it also shows you that much can be done without all the bells and whistles.”

Ms Nicholls would encourage anyone thinking about volunteering with OSSAA to do it. The organisation pays for the flights and the local hospital provides food and basic accommodation.

“Volunteering with OSSAA is the most rewarding thing I have done in my 38 years of nursing.”

HVPH CEO Lance Wheeldon said Ms Nicholls should be commended for giving so much to her profession and another community. HVPH also supports Ms Nicholls by donating consumables for her to take on the trip. 

*By Craig Eardley*