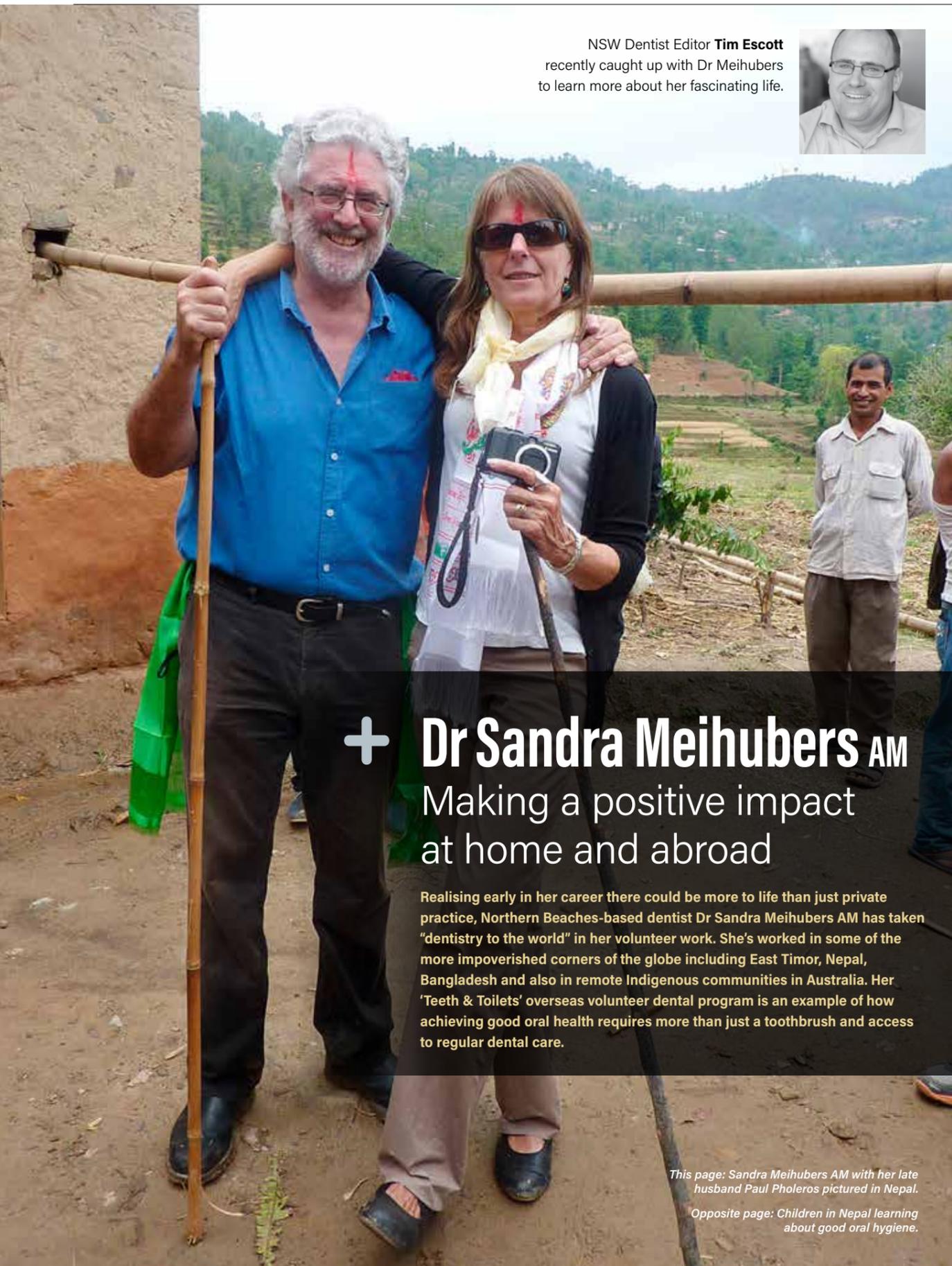


NSW Dentist Editor **Tim Escott** recently caught up with Dr Meihubers to learn more about her fascinating life.



+ Dr Sandra Meihubers AM

Making a positive impact at home and abroad

Realising early in her career there could be more to life than just private practice, Northern Beaches-based dentist Dr Sandra Meihubers AM has taken "dentistry to the world" in her volunteer work. She's worked in some of the more impoverished corners of the globe including East Timor, Nepal, Bangladesh and also in remote Indigenous communities in Australia. Her 'Teeth & Toilets' overseas volunteer dental program is an example of how achieving good oral health requires more than just a toothbrush and access to regular dental care.

*This page: Sandra Meihubers AM with her late husband Paul Pholeros pictured in Nepal.
Opposite page: Children in Nepal learning about good oral hygiene.*

What have been your career highlights in your volunteer work?

Firstly to clarify, my work in Australia is a career commitment. Lessons learned in working with Aboriginal communities, both urban and remote, help me greatly when establishing programs in developing countries where indeed I am a "volunteer".

It's always satisfying to start with nothing but perhaps an invitation to come into a community where dental services are non-existent or need enhancing, and to create a program that builds on community structures, improves oral health over time, builds skills locally, and develops trust through long term relationships.

You've been intrigued by the life and culture of Indigenous people. What is it that makes this part of Australia so special?

Delivering appropriate oral health care to all people in Australia is our core business as health practitioners. I work principally with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, where Aboriginal people are my bosses and my guides and who, often against really tough odds, never give up trying to improve the health of their people.

Through my work I've learned first-hand about the effects of Australia's colonial



Have you seen a shift in the number of dental professionals assisting Indigenous communities?

In my early dental days, working in Aboriginal communities was not really considered "real" dentistry. It's been interesting to see the shift particularly in the past 10 years or so, where people are starting to show more understanding of and interest in Indigenous communities. The challenge still is to maintain continuity and consistency of services particularly in remote communities, and to focus efforts on delivering oral health care and clinical services that will yield real improvements. While changes in dietary and oral health behaviours are desired, many communities face internal and external pressures daily, and sometimes just stop listening to advice from yet another well intentioned expert.

The "Teeth and Toilets" program in Nepal continues to go strong. It's a powerful initiative. How did it come about and how is it making a difference to people's lives?

I had been working as a dental volunteer in Nepal since 2000. In 2007 I invited my husband Paul, a design architect who had turned some of his skills to improving environmental health and living conditions in Australian Indigenous communities, to visit one of the villages where I had started spending a lot of time. There were no toilets and very limited water supply. Paul worked with the villagers to design and build household toilets that had an outside tap for handwashing, fed by an attached rainwater tank.

The toilet project expanded to nearby poor villages and schools, and so we (the local Nepali dental team and I) matched our school-based dental program to the toilet programs in these places. The school toilets were built with taps and sinks for handwashing which helped us to institute

daily toothbrushing programs – no point in just handing out toothbrushes and paste if homes don't have sanitation facilities. So, "teeth and toilets", a combination of the skills Paul and I could contribute as part of overall health improvement.

The first project village, Bhattedanda, is renowned in the area as a model village due to the improved living standards.

The Paul Pholeros Foundation (PPF) was formed to continue the fantastic volunteer work. Can you tell us about this charity and the work it does?

My beautiful husband Paul passed away very suddenly in early-2016, a massively traumatic event I thought I would never recover from. However, strength has slowly been regained thanks in very large part to family and friends and acknowledging I still have a chance at life, something that was taken away from him.

I established the PPF in 2018 to continue Paul's legacy of working so hard all his life to improve the lives of others. Our founding project in 2019 supported a young plumbing team from Australia to work in Nepal on a village sanitation improvement project, alongside their local counterparts. The project involved the construction of a toilet block near the villagers' holy gathering site in the nearby forest. They dedicated this facility to "Paul Sir".

The COVID pandemic broke our plans for a planned 2020 team, so the PPF is now developing a portable hand washing unit in Nepal after running a national design competition in Australia last year.

What's the best advice you have ever been given (career or otherwise)?

Knowledge is limited, imagination encircles the world. Build on existing infrastructure – history has gone before, it doesn't start with our arrival.



policies on individuals and communities, and have lived in desert communities where I was immersed in an ancient culture and place. The generosity of spirit and underlying gentle humour have carried me through the many challenges we face in keeping programs going and have taught me so much about the life and beauty of our country.