

Educating People-Centred Dentists For Rural Australia



New dental units make a difference

All five clinics are overseen by Jake Ball, Clinical Director of Dental and Oral Health Clinics at Charles Sturt. He works alongside colleagues like Jenny Bevear, Acting Operations Coordinator, who has been with the Dental and Oral Health Clinics since their opening in 2009. In recent years, she has overseen clinic management and serves as the key contact for feedback on the facilities.

Charles Sturt University recently upgraded the dental units at one of their clinics, significantly enhancing clinical training for students and dental care services for the local community. The decision to choose Planmeca was heavily influenced by their experiences with the previous units and the exceptional service received. Initial feedback on the new units has been overwhelmingly positive – from staff, students, and patients.

Beyond the Blue Mountains, approximately a three-and-a-half-hour drive west of Sydney, lies the charming rural town of Orange. Further south, on the way to Melbourne, you will find Wagga Wagga, the largest inland city in New South Wales. Both areas have experienced significant growth in recent years.

As more people settle in Orange, Wagga Wagga, and their neighbouring towns, the demand for dental care services has risen. To address this, both towns are home to Dental and Oral Health Clinics run by the School of Dentistry and Medical Sciences at Charles Sturt University (Charles Sturt). These clinics provide essential care for local communities while offering invaluable clinical training to dentistry students.

In addition to the clinics in Orange and Wagga Wagga, Charles Sturt operates facilities in Albury, Bathurst, and Dubbo, forming a network of five clinics across its campuses. Together, these clinics treat approximately 30,000 patients each year. They also serve as the first professional training environments for Charles Sturt dentistry students, where both clinical work and simulation training are conducted using Planmeca solutions, ensuring students receive comprehensive hands-on and simulated experience.

Both Jake Ball and Jenny Bevear are pleased with the Planmeca dental units, which were installed at the Dental and Oral Health Clinic in Orange at the end of 2023. The previous units were replaced by 78 Planmeca Compact™ i Classic dental units with Planmeca Solanna® operating lights. These were later complemented with Planmeca Lumo™ dental stools.

According to Jake Ball, the updated learning environment is a source of pride for the entire staff and a key marketing point for attracting applicants to dentistry programmes at Charles Sturt.

“We do have a state-of-the-art facility, and we definitely highlight it to prospective students. Charles Sturt has made a significant investment in our facilities and technology. Having worked at other dental hospitals, I can say that dental units do make a difference. We are very lucky to have these chairs. In terms of design and ease of use, Planmeca units are fantastic. They are perfect for student training, and we haven’t encountered any problems or concerns,” Ball continues.

“Planmeca Compact i Classic a very attractive chair, very nice-looking,” Bevear agrees. “Everyone seems to be very happy with them.”

“The new chairs are very comfortable, both the dental units and the assistant stools. We have really enjoyed using them. Patients have also been reported to find the chairs very comfortable,” Jake Ball tells.



Hands-on learning through simulation

The Charles Sturt School of Dentistry and Medical Sciences offers two programmes leading to a dental profession. The three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Oral Health (Therapy and Hygiene) is based in Wagga Wagga and leads to registration as an oral health therapist. The Bachelor of Dental Science is a five-year undergraduate programme based at the Orange campus.

Additionally, the university offers a two-year postgraduate programme in collaboration with the Australian Dental Association, resulting in a Graduate Diploma of Dental Implantology. Coursework for this programme is conducted through the university, while practical training occurs in private practices.

The bachelor's programme in dental science places a strong emphasis on hands-on learning. Spanning five years, the programme provides students the opportunity to gain additional clinical experience before graduating.

"The students start quite early within their training programme with practical skills development in the simulation clinic environment, and that is a key feature throughout the programme," Jake Ball tells.

Charles Sturt University has partnered with Planmeca since 2009, when the first simulation and dental units were installed at Charles Sturt's Dental and Oral Health Clinics. Charles Sturt has a total of 80 Planmeca Compact™ i bench simulation units, with 60 located in Orange and 20 in Wagga Wagga. Additionally, teachers have their own simulation desks in both clinics. Despite years of constant use, the simulation units remain in excellent condition.

"The simulation units are very well maintained and still look brand new," Jenny Bevear praises.

Training people-centred practitioners

In their second year, the students begin practicing on each other to learn basic dental examination skills. They start seeing real patients in the latter part of the second year and continue clinical training until the end of the fifth year.

"In addition to training the technical skills required from a dentist, we aim to ensure our students become person-centred practitioners who are culturally safe in their practice. We want them to be prepared to work in rural and regional communities. We value interpersonal skills, which we consider essential for being an excellent practitioner," Ball tells.

Class sizes in the dentistry programme are kept small to provide students with ample one-on-one instruction. The number of applicants to the Bachelor of Dental Science programme varies annually, sometimes reaching up to 1,000. Applicants who meet the academic threshold must also take a dental school exam assessing their aptitude, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills.

However, there are alternative pathways for students from rural backgrounds or those who have completed or are pursuing other university degrees. Of all applicants, 100 are usually interviewed, and 40 to 50 are accepted.

"We emphasise that education is accessible regardless of your background. Therefore, we also have rural and indigenous pathways for our students. The university also offers excellent support services for financial assistance, inclusion, and accessibility. There is a dedicated team to assist people with disabilities, ensuring their education is tailored so they can fully participate," Jake Ball tells.

Support for rural communities

Insightful, inclusive, impactful and inspiring. These are the key values of Charles Sturt University, also reflected in its dentistry programme. The university maintains a collaborative relationship with the Centre for Rural Dentistry and Oral Health, which runs the five Dental and Oral Health Clinics.

The rural and regional focus is a major focus point for Charles Sturt, particularly in dentistry. The university is committed to improving opportunities and outcomes for the people of rural and regional Australia. Charles Sturt collaborates with external stakeholders within the regional communities to ensure that the university delivers high-quality oral health services and builds a sustainable health workforce for the long term.

“Regarding the workforce that we are building, one of our priorities is to ensure that our graduates will undertake patient-centred care, that they are culturally safe in managing their patients and that they are really aligning with principles of evidence-based practice,” Jake Ball emphasises.

Students with rural and regional backgrounds are actively being recruited, as they are more likely to stay in the rural areas and provide oral care services locally after graduation. The dentistry programme also focuses on empowering students to make a positive contribution to the health of their local communities.

Community engagement is also a key feature of the clinical training, which links to servicing rural and regional area needs as well. The five Charles Sturt clinics are open to patients from the local community.

“We also have some fantastic up-and-running projects outside our campuses. For example, we send students out to a clinic in Brewarrina in the northern NSW region, which is predominantly an Aboriginal community. The clinic is both a fantastic service to that region but also a fantastic clinical experience and training opportunity for the students. We also send students into nursing homes with a portable dental unit to perform oral health screenings,” Jake Ball tells.

The students also train in metropolitan hospitals to ensure they encounter people from various backgrounds.

Choosing Planmeca for reliable support

One significant factor in choosing Planmeca units for the renewal project was their local distribution partner in Australia, Henry Schein Halas. In addition to project deliveries, local distribution partners handle after-sales services and support, ensuring customers always make the most of their investments.

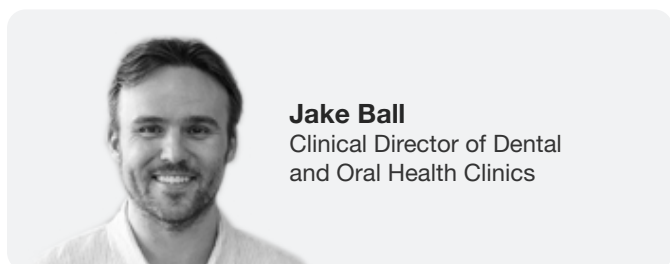
“The units as well as the service we have received from Planmeca has been fantastic. The units are the most important part in our work, and being able to rely on them is really important. In terms of technology, we have been incredibly happy,” Jake Ball says.

“A major factor in the decision was the service from the Henry Schein Halas team. We wanted to continue with them because of the service, and we felt it was the most important thing. It is not just buying the chairs, it is having the service to back you up when you need them. And the service we got from the technical people of Henry Schein for Planmeca units, it was amazing,” Jennifer Bevear recounts.

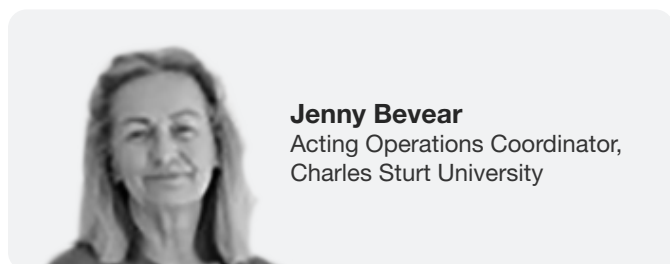
When new dental units were installed, some of the previous ones were recycled through local charity projects. For example, the decommissioned units of the Walker clinic were donated to a local men’s shed association, which dismantled the products and used the parts for their building projects. Once again, the university made an effort contributing to the wellbeing of local communities.

“The members of that men’s shed were able to use those materials for their arts and crafts projects. The shed brings people together to work on those kinds of projects, which is fantastic. So being able to supply our old units for their use, that was a really positive thing,” Jake Ball says.

[Find Out More](#)



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