

Desert dentistry for veterans



Often in our world today, a frequently neglected segment of our society is the Veteran population. Areas of neglect are health care, dental care in particular, and vision. ADI Fellows have been at the forefront of helping these sometimes neglected people we should be thanking them for their service. I know ADI colleagues who treat one Veteran every month, at no charge for services.

A few months ago, planning was set in motion for a mission project to help Veterans in the Morongo Basin area of the high desert in Southern California, near Joshua Tree National Park. Flying Doctors (Los Médicos Voladores (LMV)-SoCal Chapter, www.flyingdocs.org), Healing California (www.healingca.org), and the Academy of Dentistry International (www.usa-adi.org), joined forces with the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post7264 in Joshua Tree, California, not far from the 29 Palms Marine Base [Figure 1]. Perfect weather with blue skies, amazing colleagues, many of whom flew in from North California [Figure 2], and beautiful Veterans, made for a spectacular day full of blessings in both directions. The “flying” part of the Flying Doctors consists in unselfish, service-oriented volunteer private pilots flying their own small private Cessna, Cherokees, and other planes including passenger participants, to our event. Our pilots served us well: Rick Utermoehlen, a retired Navy pilot, and retired pilot, LMV corporate attorney, and former president of LMV, Denny Freidig who served as an Air Force pilot.

I drove over to the California “high desert” [Figure 3] (as opposed to the “lower desert,” like Palm Springs and Coachella Valley), a 3 h

trip from home in Escondido, CA, on Friday afternoon, checking into the hotel. We began bright and early Saturday morning, 7 am, at the VFW Post7264 in their yard [Figure 4]. After the team of about 25, including dental assisting students from the San Bernardino County ROP Dental Assisting Program [Figure 5], formed a circle for orientation and assignments in the chilly morning air, we took our positions and began. Four dentists, three wonderful RDH hygienists, and vision specialists provided treatments. I did the triage and gave anesthetic, Healing California provided chairs, units, instruments, and all the vision equipment needed, such a blessing



Figure 2: Providers flying in from distances.



Figure 1: VFW post #726.



Figure 3: Beautiful California desert.

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for their covering this major consideration and task in carrying out a mission project [Figure 4].



Figure 4: All instruments ready for treatments.



Figure 5: Students assisted and learned.



Figure 6: Listening to patient histories.

As I spoke with each Veteran patient, I asked them questions, then listened.

Listening is an important part of an examination as we learn so much about the patient's history, chief complaint, needs, wants, and fears [Figure 6]. All patients thanked me, several saying that they had never before experienced a dentist who listened, only experienced those who talk and mandate treatment. We all know how important it is that patients feel in charge of their health and empowered to be part of the decision-making process for their treatment. Several as they talked with me, had tears in their eyes as they explained the history and what they wanted. We also made sure to perform soft-tissue inspection, looking for any signs of oral cancer, realizing a higher incidence in this population [Figure 7].

All team members performed their tasks like a well-oiled machine, everyone being important to achieving a successful day [Figure 8]. The gratitude of these patients was overwhelming. Every single one expressed their appreciation with "Thank You's" for our being there to help them, for giving up our weekend to serve. One outstanding Veteran told me what a joy the warm vibes were to him:



Figure 7: Cancer screening examinations were given.



Figure 8: Colleagues working together.

“There is so much selfishness, ugliness, slothfulness, bad talk, and evil in our country and the world, it is so wonderful to see people making a difference, and instead of just talking about the need for goodness and unselfishness, but actually doing something to better our world by helping others.”

I was stopped in my tracks for an instant, being impacted by his opening up to me [Figure 9].

I went to help and bless people, but as I drove back to the hotel for dinner that evening, I realized once again, that these people who fought for my freedom, blessed me more than I could ever do for them. It is a paradox difficult to understand until you have been there and done that, and you feel the reward.



Figure 9: Dr. Fritz treating veterans.

My thanks to my fantastic colleagues in Los Médicos Voladores, for their never-ending thirst for service to others, the most giving group of colleagues I have been privileged to work within my 50-year dental career. And a special thanks to Jeff and Laura Grabow, and Luz Moreno, for their skill in organizing and carrying out such an extraordinary event to help Veterans. Without their hard work, these events would not take place in Southern California. And sincere thanks to Stacy Loeffler Gradman, Managing Director of LMV Flying Doctors, for her never-ending work to give us opportunities. We count it an honor to inspire others to get involved through this report.

In the words of my hero, Dr. Albert Schweitzer (MD, PhD), who knew by the life he lived, what service is:

“I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: The only ones among you who will be really happy, are those who have sought and found how to serve.” The reward is in the action, and we admonish all reading this to get involved, you will never regret it, rather, you will want more of the same!

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