

Reaching to the bottom of the Caribbean



The Caribbean became a special part of the world to me, after spending the first 6 years of my career there, directly after leaving the LLU School of Dentistry, learning to practice dentistry, and also, to speak Spanish. After I moved back to California, I realized that in 6 quick years something about the Caribbean style had made its indelible imprint on me. Part of my heart stayed there, even though physically I was back home in California.

In Puerto Rico, they call this “La Mancha del Plátano,” or “the stain of the banana.” As some of you know, if you get any juice from a cut banana stalk on your clothing, the stain is indelible and never washes out: It is there for the life of the shirt or pants. Hence, to this day, I work part of the time during the year in Puerto Rico.

Well, way down at the south end of this beautiful, unique chain of islands, at the bottom of the Caribbean, lies the country of Trinidad and Tobago. This is the warmest part of the Caribbean, so tropical weather with humidity and frequent, short spells of warm rain are obvious with its location 10° north of the equator. The larger island of Trinidad, with 1.3 million people and 4828 square miles, is so far south that it is only seven miles from the coast of Venezuela, South America. Tobago, with 50,000 people, is much smaller and less developed. It lies 21 miles northeast of Trinidad and is 21 miles long with only 116 square miles. Probably because it is less developed, it is more of a tourist destination than Trinidad. Together, along with five smaller islands, they make up the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Trinidad, the southernmost island of the West Indies, at the bottom of the Caribbean Island chain, was once an extension of the northern coast of Venezuela. However, the lowlands were washed away by the Orinoco River and at the closest point now, only seven miles of sea separate Trinidad and Venezuela. Port of Spain, the capital, is one of the Caribbean’s most cosmopolitan cities. People from Africa, China, Britain, India, France,



Holland, Portugal, Spain, and many other countries, make their homes here, along with descendants of the Arawak and Carib Indians. The present-day mix of West Indian with East Indian food, culture, and faces is unique to this Republic.

Trinidad was originally inhabited by several Amerindian tribes, including Caribs, who called the island “Iere,” meaning “land of the hummingbird.” However, Christopher Columbus was inspired by three mountain peaks when he sighted land in 1498, and he called the island La Trinidad (Spanish for “The Trinity”), a confirmation of his vow to name his next discovery after the Holy Trinity. Tobago, which lies 21 miles northeast of Trinidad, has 50,000 inhabitants and covers 116 square miles. Inhabited by Caribs when first sighted by Columbus, he named it Concepción. It was subsequently coveted as a strategic position by every major power operation in the Caribbean. As a result, this island changed hands more than any other in the West Indies. Its present name may be derived from the Spanish word for tobacco, but exactly when and how the island was named is unknown. It is believed that Tobago was the inspiration for the shipwreck tales of the Swiss Family Robinson and Robinson Crusoe.

In 1889, Trinidad and Tobago have united administratively. The richest and second largest country of the British West Indies acquired independence in 1962 and in 1976, Trinidad and Tobago became a Republic, with the capital at Port of Spain, Trinidad. Nowadays, a citizen of this Republic, from either Island, can be referred to as Trinbagonian.

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The SDA medical mission work was begun by Robert F. Dunlop, MD, as a small apartment/office in 1948. Three years later, the office was later moved to a former guest house on Mucurapo Road, and eventually in 1960, to the current hospital location. What later became the hospital, the 60-bed Community Hospital of SDA, was a gift from the government of an old leprosarium, along with 4½ acres. This run-down building was painstakingly renovated over years and was finally opened for service to the community nearly 3 years later in 1961.



This healthcare facility is one of the better in this country and a bright light of witness to the people under the able leadership of Richard Spann, MD, the CEO, Medical Director, and a Neurosurgeon who covers Trinidad, Tobago, and Guyana. His capable right arm is Victoria de Coteau who keeps an exhausting and frantic pace with three different telephones in her office ringing off the hook. She frequently needs to resolve problems in other locations within and without the hospital. There are also two satellite medical clinics under the direction of Community Hospital: One in Siperia, Trinidad, and the other in Scarborough, Tobago, besides the only satellite dental clinic.

One of the difficulties first encountered when arriving in Trinidad and Tobago is the language. Despite being English, it is a very different brand from the North American English. Moreover, when the local slant is put onto pronunciation and sentences, it becomes somewhat perplexing and difficult to understand this local dialect. At times I could understand < 50% of what was said. Some examples are:

“De chile bohn a cookie eye.” (This child is cross-eyed from birth)”

“Dis chile a red Mike” (Pure white, pink eyes, African features – Albinism)

“De blook duz loss away, loss away from de fireballs.” (Hemorrhage from uterine fibroids).

“Ah losin’ de nature.” (Impending impotence).

“No doctah, can let you check de buttafly, have visitors.” (No pelvic exam because the menses are on)

“She a doglah wid de mosquito drumsticks.” (A part-Indian

with skinny legs)

“Ah burnin’ in de ten commandments.” (Itchy toes – athletes’ foot)

“Does have de mad blood buttons all about, all about.” (Itchy skin, urticaria)

“He makin’ style wid de eyes four.” (Wearing glasses to impress)

“She walkin’ one eye.” (Conjunctivitis with a patch).

“Ah makin’ seven popo.” (Pregnant for the seventh time).

“Doctah, an en see a ting dis 3 month.” (Pregnant for 3 months).

“I had was gie de patient a jook wi’ de penicillin needle an’ she well dead.” (Anaphylaxis from penicillin allergy)

“Doctah, de sterilizah en wukkin’.” (Sterilizer nonfunctional)

As you might see, some of what is said cannot be understood by an outsider.

The dental department is conveniently located on the ground floor of the hospital, near the Emergency entrance. Delphina Nesta Ovid, DDS, is the Dental Director, and they are operating five dental operatories. Two new dentists, Doctors Lee, husband and wife, will be joining the dental staff very soon, for a total of three full-time providers. As mentioned, there is a satellite dental clinic with one chair, in Scarborough, Tobago, with Alvin Mottley, DDS, providing service to that community. It has been my privilege to lend volunteer assistance here, in both dental clinics, with emphasis on oral surgery backup coverage. The Dental Council (like our Dental Board) here does not streamline the licensing procedures due to apparently fraudulent documents being presented to them frequently, for licensure by credentials. Some of our volunteers have been denied a license to practice, as copies of licenses and diplomas were presented rather than the required originals. The experience at both dental clinics was very positive, as many of the patients would get up after surgery, smile, and say “Thank you,” something I see much less back home Stateside. This appreciation is voiced again at the postoperative appointments.





Outreach clinics are a big part of the medical work at Community Hospital. On Sunday at least twice a month, the



busiest lady in administration, our Vicky, takes a group out to a remote area of needy people. Screenings, and preventive, and health education activities are presented, in an effort to freely help some of the neediest on this island. I found out many years ago that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. I was privileged to assist on two of these outreach outings during my month there. We returned with tired bodies and sore backs but a warm glow of satisfaction in having done a little physical and spiritual caring for those needy people.

There is something inexplicable, almost magical, that occurs when we give out of love with service to others. We go with the intent of giving something valuable to them. However, when it is over, we realize these people have given something back to me, which is greater, and probably more valuable. The glow of satisfaction of having helped a little is my reward and will live in me for a long time. I admonish more Academy



of Dentistry International members to get involved with temporary volunteer relief work in international dentistry. At



the end of the day, will we have taken more than our share, or given more than our share?



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