

Dental outreach brings fulfillment to life



We have made dental, short-term missions (STMs) a joyous priority for over 20 years on 60 trips as a dentist and a nurse/educator couple. As the *Journal of Global Oral Health* asked us to chronicle our past year's activities, we hope to inspire other dental professionals to help the many, dentally disadvantaged people at home and abroad. In addition to impacting underserved populations, STMs bring holistic development and personal growth to the dental professional.^[1] We all long for a sense that we are contributing to something larger than ourselves to a greater good.^[2] Volunteering helps people learn about the world and themselves.^[3] Count Hermann von Keyserling, a German philosopher, believes that “the shortest path to oneself is around the world. Individuals encounter novel and unfamiliar experiences that force them to constantly adjust how they think, feel, and act; it requires openness to change.”^[4] St. Augustine said, “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page” and Francis Bacon endorses: “Travel, in the young, is a part of education: In the elder, a part of experience.”^[5]



Working for hugs in Guatemala.

In 2019, we served on STMs in Fiji and Kiribati (January), Rwanda and Guatemala (March), South Sudan (May), and provided hurricane Dorian relief to displaced persons in the Bahamas (October). Local, state, and international dental assistance were also a blessing as we aided under-resourced populations in our hometown (Colorado Springs Mission Medical Clinic), our state (Colorado Mission of Mercy [COMOM] held in Glenwood Springs), and at a dental outreach in Paonia where remote area

medical (RAM) began a Colorado initiative. Representing the Christian Dental Society (CDS) www.christiandental.org at dental convention, exhibit booths in seven states allowed an investment in other dental professionals' lives as we spent each conference day answering questions as to the “why, where, and how” of mission work, utilizing our book *Dental Mission Manual: For Portable, Short-Term Dental Trips*. It is entirely possible to outfit a portable, dental clinic that can provide quality dentistry in four, 50-pound luggage pieces. The availability of lightweight, ergonomic, portable dental chairs and stools (16 pounds), dependable dental operating units (33 pounds), adequate lighting (light-emitting diode headlamps), and cheap, easy, and effective pressure pot sterilization makes for a workable trip.^[6]

Most religions encourage helping others and, for many dentists, mission work aligns with their spiritual beliefs.^[7] Experienced trip attendees often consider STMs more closely connected to pilgrimage than to tourism.^[8-10] Our faith-based quest to help people using dental skills has, in turn, given us purpose, significance, and the chance to bond in our relationships with each other and with diverse, interesting people from around the world. As a dentist, Dr. Whipps states, “from my wife’s and my perspective, true happiness will never be gained by the financial whims of people. True satisfaction will only be gained by learning how to give yourself away.”^[11]

FIJI AND KIRIBATI

During January of the past 3 years, we have served in the South Pacific with the Jabez Humanitarian Foundation www.jabezhf.org. This provides a beautiful break from cold weather at home to these islands of paradise, for the dental, social, and spiritual need is great like many other places in the world. Our first trip to the island of the Banabans involved an isolated people group who originally inhabited Ocean Island north of Fiji. A discovery of phosphate, its subsequent mining by the British, and a Japanese invasion during World War II forced this unique people group to relocate to Rabi Island in 1945, making for a dentally, inaccessible situation. We were told that it took 3 months of wages to even go to the Fiji mainland to seek dental care.

On our 2nd January trip, we returned to the area to provide dentistry in the Republic of Kiribati, a sovereign state with over 100,000 people, half of which live on Tarawa Atoll where

3,000 Americans were killed in 3 days taking the fortified island from the Japanese. The nation comprised 32 atolls and one raised coral island, Banaba, for an area of 313 sq. miles. After over 20 hours of flying time to this Polynesian area, we were not allowed to enter the country due to a clerical error on the paperwork and were ushered back onto the plane that only came out once a week from Fiji to the isolated islands. Although saddened by the canceled mission on the Tarawa Atoll, we returned to Fiji to work in a church and were delighted to start an enterprise where older Fijians volunteered with us. The mandatory retirement at age 55 in Fiji left many, able-bodied, potential helpers needing inspiration on how to serve their fellow islanders, and our visit was the impetus.



Five-chair clinic on island of Tarawa in Kiribati.

As the church of Tarawa pleaded for us to return and assured us there would be no entry problems this year, we recruited four other dentists and a supporting team of seven to serve. An impending cyclone between Fiji and Kiribati delayed us for 2 days near the Nadi International Airport. Rather than waste the time of the skilled, dental team, we set up our portable, dental clinic in a party room at the hotel and served the workers and the dentally-disadvantaged people of the area. When the weather cleared, we flew to Tarawa, set up on a tiled slab under a large, thatched-roof right next to the water. The balmy breezes made for a lovely setting to reach out to those we had hoped to treat a year prior.

EXHIBIT BOOTHS AT NINE CONVENTIONS

In between STMs, we attended dental conventions in Colorado, Massachusetts, Illinois, Texas, California, Washington State, and New York for the CDS. We are always inspired by the interest and the generosity of many dental professionals who give to people worldwide who suffer greatly from dental problems. As Dr. Damazo, the 2014 American Dental Association (ADA) Humanitarian Award recipient states, “I prefer to give back through action and using my talents, rather than just writing checks. Giving money is not nearly as personal as giving time and sweat. I give back by removing pain.”¹²



Christian Dental Society exhibit booth at an American Dental Association convention.

RWANDA AND GUATEMALA

In March, we embraced opportunities to separately visit Africa and Central America.

Diane went with Liberty University www.liberty.edu and Compassion International www.compassion.com to visit children in Rwanda on the 25th anniversary of the genocide against Tutsi people where 800,000 humans were slaughtered by the members of the Hutu majority government. Visiting reconciliation villages and children’s hope centers (where Diane taught dental hygiene) demonstrated the amazing resiliency of the human spirit following the unspeakable horrors that can occur in our fragile world.



Diane teaching compassion children in Rwanda.

Bob concurrently traveled to Guatemala to train American and Guatemalan dental and hygiene students in a large portable clinic set up in a medical facility. STMs for students are seen as a formative—even transcendent—experience for young adults.¹³ A study concerning travel and dentistry for dental students suggests that they value international exchanges, which enhances students’ knowledge and self-

awareness related to cultural competence.^[14,15] STM dental student participants learn to provide adequate care to patients with diverse values, beliefs, and behavior. Training graduates who can practice effectively in a multicultural environment is a goal of contemporary dental education.^[16,17]

This was Bob's fourth trip in support of Dr. T. Bob Davis, the 2018 ADA Humanitarian Award recipient, who has taken dental students for 40 years to experience the joys of volunteering in a dental capacity. Davis has initiated and is the driving force behind the construction and the equipping of a 21-chair, dental clinic on the new, second floor of the medical facility as a permanent site to train dental students from the U.S. and Guatemala. The new clinic is expected to be ready for a large group of dental students and mentors who serve dentally-vulnerable children annually during Spring break www.guatemalansmiles.com.



Dr. Bob teaching American and Guatemalan students in Guatemala.

SOUTH SUDAN

An April invitation to help at a U.N. refugee camp in South Sudan prompted the formation of an international team of ten dental providers for a tent city of over 90,000 people, many of whom had lived there 5 years without the availability of dental care. Similar to many places, there are accessible medical clinics, but dental care is difficult for most people in the world to obtain. Kassebaum *et al.* claim that "oral health has not improved in the last 25 years, and oral conditions remain a major public health challenge. The number of people with untreated oral conditions rose from 2.5 billion in 1990 to 3.5 billion in 2015."^[18] Untreated tooth decay is the most widespread, chronic disease worldwide, and the most prevalent condition of 291 major diseases; periodontal disease is the sixth most prevalent.^[19]



Clinic in refugee camp in South Sudan.

In South Sudan, we partnered with the Indigenous People's Technology and Education Center (I-TEC) www.itecusa.org who trains caring, capable, local individuals to extract painful teeth on their own people. Also represented were members of the CDS, the Christian Medical and Dental Associations www.cmda.org, the Reconciliation Ministry Network International www.rmni.org, and local churches. An old, airplane hangar, pierced with bullet holes, became a portable, dental clinic and a Sudanese dentist, an Indian-trained dentist employed in Jamaica, and four American dentists treated patients, whereas I-TEC dentists and staff (with dentists from Uganda, Kenya, and America) trained eight, Sudanese adults to extract teeth on dental patients.

PAONIA, COLORADO

RAM www.ramusa.org does dental/medical/eyeglass mobile clinics throughout the U.S. and overseas with a vision of preventing pain and alleviating suffering by providing free quality healthcare to those in need. They started in 1985 and have run over 1,000 volunteer clinics since then. They came to Colorado for the 1st time with a 20-chair dental clinic in August, and we participated in their well-run, mobile clinic.

COMOM

In October, we participated in our 13th COMOM www.comom.org in charge of 60 chairs of restorative in a 120-chair mobile clinic. Mission of Mercy clinics started with Dr. Terry Dickinson, the 2010 ADA Humanitarian Award recipient, in 2000 to help the dentally underserved of Virginia. In 2008, Americas Dentist Care Foundation www.adcfmom.org was formed to warehouse, set-up, and transport 100-chair, mobile, dental clinics throughout the U.S. Currently, most states now do one or more Mission of Mercy clinics to provide much-needed, free, dental care.



Colorado Mission of Mercy Clinic.

THE BAHAMAS

After the devastating hurricane Dorian hit the Bahamas in September 2019, an impressive coalition of 7 organizations mobilized to help the Bahamas Dental Association put together a large, dental clinic to help displaced people who had come to Nassau following the destruction on some of the surrounding 700 islands that make up the Bahamas. After a month in makeshift camps, the Bahaman dental society recognized the great dental needs as many of the people living in shelters required dental care. The Bahaman dental society reached out with a plea for a dental disaster relief effort and six organizations came together to set up a 27-chair, portable, dental clinic at the Church of God of Prophecy on East Street within about 2 weeks. We, as representatives of the CDS, were contacted, since the organization loans out portable dental equipment. We recruited several CDS members to help us take 20 portable, dental operating units, light-weight chairs and stools, two X-ray units, and restorative instruments.



27-chair clinic for disaster relief in Bahamas.

International Medical Relief (IMR) www.imrus.org provided additional dental chairs and surgical instruments and the ADA Foundation www.adafoundation.org contributed financially.

Henry Schein Cares Foundation www.hscaresfoundation.org provided most of the dental supplies, to include hand pieces and paid for the transportation and the rental of all the equipment from the CDS and IMR which were flown to the Bahamas on a chartered plane. RAM brought a complete 12-chair dental clinic in conjunction with the National Dental Association www.ndaonline.org and took the lead in organizing the clinic. This was a collective, unique, dental effort to help in a disaster relief situation that quickly brought together international and national dental organizations to help those in a crisis.

CONCLUSION

It is thought that people with a higher purpose in life devote more time to service and commitment to larger social causes.^[20] STMs play a restorative role for volunteers by reconnecting them with the altruistic values that steered them toward a health care career in the first place.^[21] STMs can foster feelings of making an impact and a difference and can even bring fun and fulfillment to one's life.^[22] Seeing the world through two sets of eyes relativizes both and makes it easier for us to see the deep changes that are needed in our own worldview as well as in those of the people we serve.^[23] STMs promote traveling to new places, meeting new people, and doing something worthwhile at the same time.^[24] Traveling on STMs enrich lives through the beauty and the grandeur of the world, the diversity of its people as we live with, work with and enjoy new friends in their distinctive environments free from the fetters of tourism. It is a fulfilling opportunity that we would wish that every dental professional could experience often.

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