

Dominican Republic Dental Clinic: 2006

The sun was already hot when the first truck arrived with 12 children from the bateye. Their faces and clothes are scrubbed clean and their eyes shine with excitement, curiosity and some concern about things to come. They have arrived at the clinic 'Centro de Salud Divina Providencia', in Consuelo, Dominican Republic, where we are running a voluntary dental clinic for the people of Consuelo and the shantytowns that spring up beside the sugarcane plantations. Most of these 'bateyes' have no electricity or running water and the workers are paid a salary that barely feeds a family, much less addresses health concerns. In fact, the cost of extracting a tooth amounts to nearly a week's wages for a sugarcane worker.



The clinic at Consuelo was established 38 years ago by the 'Congregacion de las Inmaculada Concepcion', and attends to the health needs of the surrounding residents and nearby Haitian cane workers. The building consists of a small pharmacy and lab, 6 treatment rooms and administrative space. Electricity is generally available and a backup generator fills the gaps. Dr Francisca Vasquez, the clinic director, was our gracious host and helped us with the clinic setup. Finding suitable chairs, storage spaces, lights, fans (what luxury) and working surfaces make for a more efficient clinic. Sister Susan Daley, who has spent the last 38 years in Consuelo

knows the needs of the community, and with Dr. Vasquez, helped to coordinate patient prioritization. Once we cleaned and organized the space and made some modifications/repairs on existing equipment we were ready to begin. Patients were screened, given local anaesthetic and designated for surgery, restorative or endodontic treatment. Where possible, teeth are restored, but many were too badly broken down had to be pulled. A few root canals were done selectively, primarily for the front teeth of younger patients. Some patients arrived with chronic draining extra-oral abscesses and had been given topical ointment as treatment previously! In total we saw about 300 patients, including 200 extractions, restored 280 surfaces, and did four root canals. Fortunately, we had an excellent backup team: our 7 children and 3 spouses assisted at chairside, translated Spanish, scrubbed, sterilized and organized the instruments, distributed toothbrushes and prizes and gave moral support to the patients. Once again we utilized donated soccer uniforms as packing material and gave these to the younger patients when treatment was completed. The patients were also provided with written instructions in Spanish teaching them why they get cavities and how to prevent them in the future. It is difficult though, to tell a child not to eat sweets, when their only food for the day may be a piece of sugarcane. One also can't help but wonder why so little of the wealth of the sugar industry and tourist resorts that line the beaches of

Dominican Republic makes its way back to these people for whom life is such a struggle. More equitable wages, health and family planning education, clean water, schools for the children and a small plot of land to raise vegetables and a few chickens could go a long way to improve their situation. This seems so simple, doesn't it?



The decision to include our families in a project such as this was a first for us. We decided that with the help and supervision of our spouses, the children (ages 10 – 22) could be both helpful clinically and gain a perspective on a different way of life. Age appropriate delegation of duties was sometimes a challenge, but they came to



understand the seriousness of the clinical conditions we encountered and brought a joy and enthusiasm with them that brightened our days as families and made the process easier for the many young patients that we saw.



During a visit to a nearby bateye, they made props and put on a short play demonstrating the damaging effects of sweets and the importance of oral hygiene.

In addition to treating patients, we worked with Sonia, a local dentist and Doreen, a first year dental student from Dominican Republic to emphasize the importance of proper sterilization technique, upgrade clinical techniques and reviewed current dental materials and procedures. The need for patience, respectful diplomacy, consistent accuracy and attention to technical detail and compassion for the patients makes one aware that clinical teaching truly is an art. A two-week clinical program can only



treat a limited number of patients, but it is in the teaching of a fellow healthcare worker that one has the potential to influence the long term level of care that many patients will receive. When this is combined with a healthy stock of supplies and current improved



technologies, it makes for a most positive experience for all concerned. The days passed quickly, and as confidence in our group grew, people started to arrive at 6:00am in order to get into line for the possibility of treatment. Unfortunately, even with so many hands, the work was never done and many were turned away. The poorest from the bateyes were given priority but the need was great everywhere.

We are very grateful for the most generous donations from the dental manufacturing and dental supply companies, our local pharmacies, the University of Toronto, and our patients in Canada. Good hand pieces and curing light, a portable dental unit, a sterilizer, lots of anaesthetic, sundries and supplies allows us to work efficiently and provide patients with treatment that meets current standards of care. We are also grateful for the attentive support of Sister Susan Daly and the cheerful guidance of Dra. Francisca Vasquez, clinic director. Their importance to the successful liaison between the needs of the local community and the technical/clinical services we provide must be emphasized.

In two short weeks we can't change the world, but the spirited cooperation of like-minded people goes a long way to alleviate the pain and suffering of many. Teaching preventive measures and improving techniques and sensitivity of future healthcare workers will improve the care of their patients. In exposing our children to service and a simpler way of life they will realize that each of us has the capacity to make a difference and improve the quality of life on this planet.



Yours truly,

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