‘Filling the gap’ in Afghanistan

A unique dental program in Afghanistan is saving lives, raising the infrastructure level and bringing about social change for women and orphans.

Imagine that you have a dental problem, a toothache. The tooth is painful and getting more intense. What would be your best course of action?

Most people would be very concerned and want to contact a dentist to arrange for prompt treatment. You might be given antibiotics and pain medication, and your great concern would be lessened knowing that you had access to proper care.

In another country, you might not be as fortunate. You would know that no treatment was possible because there were no dentists. So you would resign yourself to endure the pain, as you had done in the past, and hope for the best. Or you might access a barber, who would take the tooth out without anesthetic.

No thought of antibiotics or pain medication would cross your mind, as these things are not available, either. All of your life you had lived in poverty, along with your neighbors and fellow villagers, with hardly enough to eat. You had never owned a toothbrush in all your life.

This country is Afghanistan.

Afghan health

Ninety percent of Afghans, 29 million people, have never seen a dentist. With only 154 dentists, each dentist would have to serve a quarter million people. However, dentists congregate in big cities, and rural areas have no access to care. Ninety percent of the Afghan population live in rural areas that are completely unserved by dentistry.

Dental conditions left untreated lead to eventual pulpal necrosis and chronic infection. This is a progressive condition, eventually leading to multiple abscessed teeth and, in some cases, a systemic septicemia infection that is lethal.

Many people in Afghanistan die from their teeth problems. But now, there is hope for the dental needs of Afghanistan.

A ‘dental bite’ of the Big Apple awaits you

Recently published research suggests that polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), found in foods such as fatty fish and nuts, will help keep people’s smiles healthy, as they have been shown to help lower the risks of gum disease and periodontitis.

The research examined the diet of 182 adults between 1999 and 2004, and found that those who consumed the highest amounts of fatty acids were 30 percent less likely to develop gum disease and 20 percent less likely to develop periodontitis.

Lead researcher of the study, Dr. Asghar Z. Naqvi of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre in Boston, said: “We found that n-3 fatty acid intake, particularly docosahexaenoic acid [DHA] and eicosapentaenoic acid [EPA] are inversely associated with periodontitis in the U.S. population.

“Recent dental care can prevent many problems. Regular visits for cleanings and exams are essential. Of course, brushing and flossing are important, too. Ask your dentist about the steps you can take to protect your smile.

“Fish fights gum disease”

Go ahead, take a bite. A big dental bite of the Big Apple awaits, and this year’s Greater N.Y. Dental Meeting promises to be even bigger than previous years. Get the details about who, what and when, as well as some tips that will help you make the most of the city when you aren’t at the dental meeting. (Photo/David Watts Jr., www.dreamstime.com)”

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‘Toothy’ toys at National Museum of Dentistry

Members of the public are invited to take a trip into the not-so-distant past to discover childhood toys with a toothy twist. “Open Wide! Toothy Toys that Made Us Smile” is on view at the National Museum of Dentistry. The exhibit features more than 50 objects, ranging from the original wind-up Yakiti Yak chattering teeth created in 1949 to Cabbage Patch dolls with teeth from the 1980s.

From Play Doh’s Dr. Drill-n-Fill to Barbie Dentist to an Evel Knievel battery-operated toothbrush complete with launching ramp, visitors to the museum can see games, dolls, puzzles and character toothbrushes.

The exhibit also features a playable Tooth Invaders video game from 1981 and a hands-on game corner where visitors can try their hand at classic dental themed games such as Crocodile Dentist and Mr. Mouth.

“Times change, and toys reveal what was important to us during certain times in our history,” said guest curator Elaine M. Miginsky, DDS. “They all show the creative ways we’ve encouraged children to care for their teeth over the years.”

“This special exhibit is drawn from the National Museum of Dentistry’s 40,000-object collection of dental treasures and the toy collection of guest curator Elaine M. Miginsky, DDS.”

This exhibit, which will be on display through Jan. 30, 2011, is made possible in part by Webb Mason.

Tell us what you think!

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The tragedy of Afghanistan

More than 50 years of war have made Afghanistan into a desperate place. The nation is filled with poverty and hardship. More than 5 million orphans search for some kind of meaningful future. Widows and single mothers are everywhere, begging in the streets, trying to survive.

So many adults have died that the average age is only 14. Due to the great challenges of just staying alive, 90 percent of young children die before the age of 5. The birth/death rate is the highest of any nation in the world.

Twenty children a month are killed or maimed by mine explo-
sions. Many children are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, and the orphans of older children feel that life is not worth living. But there is hope. And that hope lies in education.

Inspiration for change

The Afghanistan Dental Relief Project was founded in 2005 following a visit to the Central Highlands province of Wardak. Taking 500 pounds of portable equipment to an orphanage at 11,000 feet elevation, Dr. James Rolfe of Santa Barbara, Calif., spent three weeks treating the orphan boys there. He would first treat one of them, and then he would have the patient become his assistant.

Rolfe discovered that around 85 percent of the boys were fast learners and adapted well to the challenge of dental assisting. Seeing that the boys had no future without education, he imagined training them to be professionals.

Toward the end of his visit, Rolfe began to see people living in the surrounding area. What he saw shocked him; many people had multiple abscessed teeth, and some were on the verge of death. How could this be, he thought.

Then he learned that there was no dental care available in the entirety of Wardak Province, which is about the size of Connecticut. No dental care whatsoever for more than 200,000 people.

Why not train the orphans to be dental technicians?

Rolfe returned to Santa Barbara and, with the help of local craftsmen, converted a forty-foot shipping container into a modern dental office with three chairs, a sterilizing room and a complete dental laboratory, all self-contained with its own water supply and electricity.

He then shipped the clinic and an additional 60 tons of dental supplies and equipment at his own expense to a site in Kabul, donated by a generous Afghan-American family. Now, the clinic is up and running with three dentists seeing patients each day, treating about 20,000 patients a year. But where do the orphans come in?

The Kabul School of Dental Technology

In 2007, the Kabul School of Dental Technology was formed. Students were selected from the local population of orphans, widows, handi-capped, single mothers and socially disadvantaged populations. The eager students study hard for four months of intensive course work and clinical experience to become certified dental assistants.

Graduates can immediately get a job with local dentists or choose to continue their education to get an additional certificate as a dental hygienist or dental laboratory tech-nician. The program has allowed the boys to see many more patients and to provide a higher standard of care for the patients coming there. And it’s all provided free of charge.

Many of the students endure hardships in order to attend the school. They are extremely dedicated, always coming early and working hard to master the technical material.

In August 2009, the full-service commercial dental laboratory was opened and now dentists throughout Afghanistan have a reliable resource for their crowns and dentures, rather than sending their work to Pakistan for a questionable product. Recently, a chrome partial casting machine was added to the dental laboratory, which will soon allow production of chrome frameworks.

The first class of dental hygienists ever produced in Afghanistan is now working in the dental hygiene field, providing local dentists with a service that was not obtainable previously; you just could not get your teeth cleaned before these students graduated. Now, people line up for this service.

Making social change

The educational program has opened up new opportunities for these students. Orphans with no future now are able to determine their own lives as productive indi-
viduals. Women from the Afghan Dental Relief Project (ADRP) program have become authority figures in a male-dominated society, and people have been able to access dental health care in a sophisti-
cated system, which has improved their health and longevity.

Better access to dental care should help people live longer in Afghanistan, and raise the average mortality from only 42 years. The ADRP recently opened a clinic in the women’s prison as well.

All graduates are taught the atraumatic restorative technique in underserved areas by themselves.

Promoting volunteerism

Many dentists have journeyed to the clinic from all over the world, paying their own travel expenses, to volunteer at the facility and teach, work in the laboratory with the students or treat patients.

In addition, other dental professionals, including dental assistants, dental hygienists and dental lab technicians, also volunteer. Guests stay in a modern, secure guest house, which provides comfortable sleeping accommodations, meals, laundry, hot showers and Internet access to communicate with the folks back home, all for a small cost.

Information about travel and volunteering can be accessed on the website, www.adrpinc.org.

What you can do

With a little change, you can make a big change. One-hundred percent of all donations go directly to the support of our project. We have no salaried employees, and we all pay our own expenses. You can become a member by joining ADRP with a monthly contribution that will help support the work in the clinic and in the school.

Help build a permanent facility on the present clinic site and move the shipable clinic to another town so that we can begin another training site in that town to benefit the local residents. You can give a child complete dental care for $15.

We need donated supplies, instruments and equipment. Dentists are encouraged to contrib-
ute their gold scrap to the project, where it can be recycled to provide funding for supplies and operating expenses.

We all became dental professionals because we love doing dentistry; let’s experience the joy of using that knowledge and skill without a fee, for the good of mankind.

Donations are tax-deductible, as ADRP is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Donations can be sent to ADRP, 51 E. Canon Perdido St., Santa Barbara, Calif., 93101.

For more information, please visit the website www.adrpinc.org or e-mail the headquarters at adrp@verizon.net. Rolfe can also be contacted at (805) 965-2329.

(Source: Afghan Dental Relief Project)