Reconstructing faces post Noma

A consultant orthodontist, has been helping to reconstruct the faces of children in Africa, who have survived Noma disease, and are horrendously disfigured.

Alain Thom, a past treasurer of the British Orthodontic Society, has recently returned from Ethiopia on behalf of Facing Africa. Mr Thom helped set up the charity, which sends surgical teams to Northern Nigeria and Ethiopia to reconstruct the faces of children who have survived Noma disease, also known as Cancum Ori.

Noma starts as a small ulcer in the mouth. A healthy, well-nourished European child suffers a few days with a temperature. But the disease spreads rapidly in children who are malnourished, who have had measles and malaria and whose resistance is low.

Within a few days the cheek will be ulcerated and the teeth will loosen. The child will have a fever and be unable to eat. Within five days it will spread to the lips. Within seven days to the nose, palate and/or eye. Within two weeks, 95 per cent of the children will be dead from blood poisoning. The disease is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, where there is poverty and malnutrition.

A spokesman for the charity, Facing Africa said: ‘These survivors are left with horrendous facial disfigurement, often with no cheek, lips, palate and nose. They have ankylosis of the TMJ (loss of jaw movement) from scar tissue and are unable to open their mouths. They feed by pushing a mousy pap through the gaps in their teeth and Mr Thom had to feed some of the children a high protein ‘mush’ through a 50 ml syringe. Because of the facial disfigurement and local village taboo the children have no friends, no schooling, no socialising – no life. Some are ‘mis-treated’ by the local medicine man by boiling with hot coals and sticks.’

Facing Africa seeks out these children, assessing them as suitable for surgery (taking into account other medical conditions and bringing them into a rehabilitation unit prior to surgery.

During the trip, Mr Thom was part of the advance team whose duties were to carry out full medical, dental and social assessments, start a high protein feeding regime and a de-worming programme as well as clerking, photographing and assessing the degree of loss of jaw movement.

Extractions were performed where necessary as well as plaque removal and oral hygiene. Each patient was given their own hybrid pack and toothbrushing was supervised daily. Some had never seen a toothbrush and were used to using, on occasions, a soft twig. The children had come from remote villages. One had walked for two days just to get to the road where she could board a bus for the nine hour ride to the unit in Addis Ababa. They needed clean clothes, washing and to be shown how to use a lavatory. Each surgical team costs £40,000 in transport, materials and drugs and carries out over 50 facial reconstructions.

Mr Thom said: ‘I have seen pathology the like of which I could only imagine; poverty one cannot comprehend and had the opportunity of giving something to lovely, grateful smiling children who can now look forward to a normal life. I removed my “rose coloured spectacles” and found more to life than moving teeth!’

For more information about the work of Facing Africa, visit www.facingafrica.org

Credit crunch hits tooth fairy

The credit crunch will reduce payments left by the Tooth Fairy by up to 10 per cent for a third of children in the UK, according to a new survey.

New research commissioned by dental payment plan provider, Denplan, has revealed that children will be worse off this year with more parents deciding that the Tooth Fairy will not leave any money at all.

Thirteen per cent of parents already say the Tooth Fairy doesn’t leave money at their house, and that figure could be set to rise considerably next year as more people feel the impact of the recession.

Over a third of parents said their children would definitely see a drop in the amount of money the Fairy leaves. Children of single parents are the most likely to experience a cut in the amount they receive when times are hard (53 per cent).

Widowed or divorced parents are least likely to cut the amount they leave (16 per cent), but those of them that will, will cut it by half.

Denplan managing director, Steve Gates, said: ‘The Tooth Fairy is an age-old tradition that aims to reward children for taking good care of their milk teeth. It would be a shame to discourage such good practice, perhaps parents could consider an alternative reward that would encourage their child to continue their excellent oral healthcare habits.

Something that makes them feel important and truly rewarded. For some children staying up late is more important than the money left by the Tooth Fairy. They might prefer an extra hour’s TV or video games.’

Free check-ups for Essex

Thousands of people in Essex who have not had a dental check-up in the last two years will be offered free check-up and follow-up. NHS North East Essex has launched the initiative which includes a free check up and follow-up. A number of dentists have signed up to the initiative.

Kathy Flegg, dental lead for North East Essex Primary Care Trust (PCT) said: ‘One of our key objectives is to target people who have not been to see a dentist in the past 24 months to provide them with the necessary treatment so they are dentally fit.’

She called the campaign ‘a national first’ and said: ‘We hope as many people as possible take advantage of the offer.

People are being sent a letter and voucher and are invited to contact one of the participating dentists for their free check-up and follow-up.

The trust is also organising street dentist events where impromptu check-ups will be on offer at public venues in Clacton, Dovercourt and Colchester.

The PCT is also carrying out a two-week ‘ blitz’ of students with dental teams visiting Essex University and Colchester Institute.

Pot-bellied pig calms patients

A dentist in Pembrokeeshire is using a pot-bellied pig to help patients overcome their fears.

Many dentists have a colour-ful aquarium in their dental practice. But Dr Mark Boulcott, the principal dental surgeon at Herbrandston Dental Health Practice in Herbrandston, has gone one step further and has a pot-bellied pig called Mathilda plus numerous ferrets, terrapins, rabbits and guinea pigs.

The pig wanders around the practice’s grounds, restricted only from the car park and clinical areas.

Dr Boulcott, believes the animals are effective in helping patients overcome their anxieties when visiting the dentist.

The children are taken to see the animals ‘break the cycle of mistrust’ and to show them that dentists can be nice people.

He admits that the ‘animal therapy’ doesn’t work with every anxious child but when it does work ‘it is far better than drugs or even a general anaesthetic,’ he said.

The pot-bellied pig is helping to combat fears