Dental professionals on a mission

Barbara Koffman reports on her experiences on Christian Relief Uganda’s most recent dental mission and details how you can get involved in future relief missions.

On our mission to Uganda in March this year, we were fortunate to have five UK members in our dental team: Paul and Aliya (GDPs), Michelle (a practice manager/dental nurse) and Michael (non-dental, but on his second trip with CRU and already trained in sterilisation techniques). In Uganda, we were joined by two UK gap-year students, Todd and Lucie, Todd was directed to us by the oral health charity Dentaid to undertake research on infant oral mutilation (IOM). This is traditional practice in several East African countries, in which the deciduous canine tooth buds are gouged out as a “cure” for “tooth worms” which the village healers believe cause diarrhoea and sickness in an infant. They teach that the baby may die if this barbaric treatment is not given. Dentaid has set up an Action Group to combat this widespread practice of which I am a member.

Lucie volunteered to act as dental nurse. Dental therapist Elizabeth (resident in Uganda) and her hygienist friend Christianna joined us for a clinic at Elizabeth’s Hope Ministries project at Bwerenga. At various times we were augmented by the services of 16 dental professionals resident in Uganda who were available at different times throughout their stay.

Pain-relief clinics were set up in nine different rural areas of southeast Uganda, working in churches, schools and health centres; as well as in a Government Rehabilitation Centre for convicted child criminals and street children.

Possible treatments

All the equipment has to be transported in our vehicles and also by boat, so it is limited to hand instruments and forceps, elevators etc, local anaesthetics, Duraphat varnish and glass-ionomer cements, non-electric sterilisers and three Dentaid portable dental chairs. This enables us to set up a clinic with state-of-the-art technology.

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The service we can give covers screening, extractions, scaling and atraumatic restorative treatments (using hand instruments to excavate caries and then filling the cavity with glass ionomer cement).

Patients with more complex needs are referred to the nearest health centre for further help. (This can mean using CRU funds to transport the patient and to pay for their treatment.) Last September we found a little boy suffering from Burkitt's lymphoma, an aggressive cancer, and were able to organise hospital treatment for him. We saw him this time and he is vastly improved.

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Find out more?

We have a further trip planned for 22-29 November 2010 to climb Mount Elgon, an extinct volcano and the fourth highest mountain in Eastern Uganda. Along with the clinical team, I will be taking a team of volunteers to provide oral health education and IOM lectures. All necessary training for this will be provided. For more information, visit www.christianreliefuganda.org, email bkoffman@crul.org or call 07970 165798.

Christian Relief Uganda wishes to thank Derek Hampton of the Acteon Group of Satelec UK Ltd of St Neots for his generosity in arranging the long-term loan of an ex-demonstration Trans’Care Max portable dental unit for use in the dental missions to Uganda.

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