That great American philosopher and boxer Mohammed Ali said "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth". In the middle of February a party of 50 Brits travelled to India to take part in a joint meeting between the Indian Dental Association, the Faculty of General Dental Practitioners (UK) and the British Dental Association. After the meeting, 20 people went to Chitrakoot, a small town of about 35,000 people situated on the Mandakini River, a tributary of the Ganges lying approximately 500 miles south east of Delhi.

Chitrakoot is best known as a major historic religious centre of the Hindu faith and as a centre for pilot studies in self-reliance, based at the Deendayal Research Institute in the town. There are 500 surrounding villages with a total population of more than a million, all struggling with extreme poverty and an almost total absence of health care. The Chitrakoot Project charity aims to address a major aspect of the health problems in the area and understands that an unhealthy individual is unable to give and gain.

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be productive and self-reliant.

That said, the purpose of our visit was to see the dental clinic which is providing much-needed dental care to the community. Initially set up by Naresh Sharma from Leeds and Pommi Datta from London, it now has a financial lifeline from the AOG. Arriving at the dental project, we were amazed to see a state-of-the-art four surgery clinic in such an impoverished area. The unequivocal aspiration for the clinic was to be of the highest standard possible.

The underlying philosophy applied to both the clinic and complex it was in, was that just because it served the needy and the poor that didn’t justify having lower standards at all. This premise equally applied to the residential units, catering for both the overseas healthcare professionals and the family members who accompanied the ill. As seems to be common in charitable institutions, the enthusiasm the dental team had was a wonder to behold. Their motivation and desire to do good was almost palpable.

The clinic provides services from everything you would expect the general dental practice to provide and includes some specialty services such as implants too. The patients pay whatever they can and those who are too poor actually get all the treatment for free (including implants!).

As you would expect, treatment is only part of the overall service that patients receive. Complimenting patient treatment is a very effective and simple advice programme to prevent further dental problems. Part of that advice is to help patients understand the role of plants in ayurvedic medicine.

Hygiene is an Indian cultural value and a central practice of ayurvedic medicine. Hygienic living involves regular bathing, cleansing of teeth, skin care, and eye washing. Immediately outside the dental clinic there was a herb garden identifying plans that patients could use to care for themselves.

When you recognise that patients can travel hundreds of miles to get treatment, then you realise the immense value of prevention for these people. If you ever met a pioneer behind the charitable projects you cannot help but be awed by their humility and charisma. I guess it’s their humanism that motivates them and their charisma that attracts others which causes sorrow to the doer of the sacrifice is no sacrifice. Real sacrifice lightens the mind of the doer and gives him a sense of peace and joy”.

If you want to lighten your mind and volunteer then you might wish to know that the Chitrakoot project is always ready to accept volunteers. Usually there are a few visitors at the same time so they can make up a touring party.

Most visitors are fascinated to see how the work of the unit progresses particularly in the rural villages. Accommodation can usually be arranged but it is wise to discuss possible dates and functions with Dr Sharma beforehand. Planning well ahead also confers the advantage of accessing the cheapest airfares too.

Of course there is always the easier option simply to donate money. If you would like to donate funds to this very worthy cause, please go to http://chitrakootuk.org/ and click the ‘How you can help’ section.

Remember, this is a registered charity so download the Gift Aid form to allow some of your taxes to be added to your donation.

Final thought goes to Bob Hope - “if you haven’t any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble”.

Herb garden