The Dental Wellness Trust: helping orphans in Croatia

The Dental Wellness Trust recently travelled to Croatia to visit two orphanages and deliver much-needed oral hygiene supplies and education to underprivileged children. Diane Rochford, a hygienist and member of the British Dental Bleaching Society, was among the DWT team who made the journey.

“I went to Nazorova orphanage in Zagreb, which was for about 70 children, ranging from babies to about 12 or 15 years of age,” Diane recalls. “It also had facilities for some of the mums if they needed to be there. It sounds a bit funny because you think ‘orphanage - no parents’ but if the mums are subject to abuse from husbands, or are living in poverty, it means they can stay there with their babies.”

The orphanage has a dental unit and the dentistry is contracted by Zagreb University. “It’s quite basic - there’s no comparison between their unit and the practices that we’re used to in the UK,” says Diane. “Although the lady who treats the children there also does dentistry for special needs children.”

The Dental Wellness Trust brought some toothbrushes while Dr Hrvoje Starcevic, the trip organiser, had received donations from Croatian businesses. These gifts included toothpaste and protective caps for the toothbrush heads. “We also took some models - model teeth - and used them to demonstrate technique to the children because obviously they don’t speak English and we don’t speak Croatian!” says Diane. “It was quite surprising how quickly they picked it up - they’d put the brushes in their mouths and started giving circles straight away. It was really fun.”

Some of the children had reasonably good teeth, but others weren’t so lucky. “There were a couple that I was helping and they had a lot of decay,” Diane says. “Maybe because they weren’t brushing, or maybe because of their diet - I don’t know how long they’d been at the orphanage or what their history was. But they were probably about six or seven years old and their teeth were quite grossly decayed.”

Diane enjoyed the visit, which was her first experience of charity activity of this kind. “The children were intrigued and quite excited,” she says. “They thought it was a lot of fun and a bit different. No one was frightened. Some of them were a bit shy to start with, as most children would be, but generally once they got going it was absolutely fine. They were quite excited, and dived for the brushes and the toothpaste! We took five sets of teeth models and the children were practically snatching them out of us because they wanted to play with them, so they were really good. There were a lot of smiles on faces!”

During the visit, Diane was accompanied by Dr Linda Greenwall, founder of the DWT and Chair of the BDBS, as well as Dr Starcevic and some members of staff from the orphanage. The Trust also visited a second orphanage in Croatia called Dom za odgoj i mladezi, which is located in Zadar. “I didn’t go to that one, but Linda did,” says Diane. “It was an all-boys orphanage with children ranging from seven to 18 years of age and a number of them had suffered abuse during their lives.”

Initially Diane had some concerns about making the trip, thinking that she might find it quite emotional. On the contrary, she says, “You feel that you’re doing good and it’s a nice feeling. It’s great to be able to help in this way and it’s important for people like us to get involved. There are a lot of projects and a lot of people in need. There’s a lot more to be done - more good that needs to be done.”

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Dr Greenwall is passionate about the work of the Dental Wellness Trust and is continually developing links with other charitable or dental organisations to make a difference to the lives of others. “Linda already knew Dr Starcevic because of the BDSS’s involvement with his annual Aesthetic Dental Moment Congress in Croatia, teaching dental bleaching techniques,” says Diane. “Education really is essential, whether it’s for maintaining high standards of dentistry or helping children to clean their teeth properly for the first time.”

“We’ll also be looking to find ways for the DWT to follow up with the orphanages,” she continues, “including the possibility of Dr Starcevic taking toothbrushes and toothpaste to them on a regular basis. We do a lot of follow up in our day-to-day work in dentistry - we place a lot of emphasis on that. It’s all very well to go into places like these orphanages, but what happens after you leave? And we’re going to need more help from the industry to make sure that follow-up happens.”

Contact info

If you would like to volunteer or if you are a company wanting to demonstrate corporate responsibility by making a donation or gifts in kind, please visit www.dentalwellnesstrust.org or call 020 7207 0700 or email info@dentalwellnesstrust.org.

The DWT visit the orphanage

Handing out goodies like toothbrushes and toothpaste

The children learn about oral health

‘It’s quite basic - there’s no comparison between their unit and the practices we’re used to in the UK’