A life-changing experience: UK students provide dental care in Nepal

DTI’s Yvonne Bachmann looks at the Work the World initiative

Nowadays, health-care electives are part of many medical degree courses. Not only does the experience help students gain practical knowledge, but it also gives them the chance to expand their horizons and in some cases go abroad and learn how health systems work there. UK dental students Anisha Sangha, Catie Michaela Sherlock and Emily Hooper signed up for a dental outreach placement arranged by British organisation Work the World. In summer 2012, the young women travelled to Nepal to provide dental care to people in need.

Brighton-based Work the World offers placements abroad to those looking for experience in medicine, dentistry, nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy and radiography. Participants can go to Asia, Africa and South America. Dental students wishing to expand their knowledge can choose between a hospital placement and an outreach placement.

Anisha (22), Catie (22) and Emily (21) all chose the outreach placement, which led them to Nepal. The country is one of the poorest in Asia and the fifteenth poorest in the world, with over half the population surviving on less than US$1.25 a day, according to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

“Nepal is a Third World country, one of the poorest countries in the world, and, on research, I found that there is a severe shortage of dentists. I therefore felt that our visit would be very beneficial to the communities there,” Catie told Dental Tribune International.

The senior dental student at the University of Leeds mainly aimed at gaining more hands-on experience when entering the programme. Just like fellow student Anisha, she was sent to Pumdi Bhumdi, a village in the centre of Nepal. “We set up our dental camp in a local school in the village. Work the World provided us with portable dental chairs and units, including drills, which completely exceeded our expectations, and allowed us to provide more conservative treatment than we thought. We were able to fill many teeth that were decayed rather than simply extract them,” said Catie.

Emily, enrolled at the University of Bristol, was sent to a temporary clinic set up in a mountainous farming community overlooking the Annapurna mountain range, near the city of Pokhara. “There was a lot of interest within the local community to see who we were. We saw patients of all ages, anything from babies to the elderly, some of the latter had never seen a dentist before.”

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Together, they made sure that the placement turned out to be a very helpful opportunity to gain a great deal of hands-on experience. “We were supervised by a Nepalese dentist. There was a dental hygienist there to assist us, and also a member of Work the World staff every day,” said Anisha. “Together, they made sure that we were carrying out dental treatment to the highest standard and that any treatment we undertook was effective and provided a long-lasting result for the patients,” Catie added.

Not only did the young women provide dental treatment, but they also educated patients about dental health. According to Catie, one of the most important aspects of the volunteers’ trip was to promote oral hygiene to allow the local population to improve their dental health themselves and reduce future dental disease. “After each patient we screened, we reinforced how best to brush their teeth, providing toothbrushes and toothpaste to those who required them.”

Before they left for Nepal,
Emily, Anisha and Catie were concerned about the language barrier and thus a problem connecting with their patients. "As a dental professional you gain a rapport with your patients primarily by talking to them, and such a rapport I felt would be difficult to gain owing to the language barrier. This did happen to an extent, but the local translators were very good and you could see that they eased the patients when apprehensive," Emily told DTI. Anisha added: "It is definitely surprising how far you can still communicate your message using body language alone." For Catie, it was not always easy to bond. "Time spent with patients was very short and communication very difficult, meaning that rapport was largely impossible."

The students benefitted from the placement with regard to professional and personal experience. They pointed out that treating patients under only the necessary supervision significantly increased their self-confidence. "In terms of practical skills, the experience I gained from my elective was invaluable. I feel that I have increased in confidence in making independent clinical decisions and had improved her efficiency. For Emily, the surgical experience she gained was invaluable, she said. She was able to extract many more teeth in Nepal than she could in the same period in the U.K. "I also feel a lot more confident when faced with restorative procedures, especially treating very large carious lesions," she explained.

Additionally, the dental students had a chance to meet and work with the local people and get to know a new culture and lifestyle. "I would definitely say that I have had an eye-opening experience, in terms of not only the dentistry but also the culture, people and religion," said Emily. "The Nepali people have a lovely nature and they welcome you into their community with open arms. They were so grateful for the dental treatment that we were able to provide." All three students stated they would volunteer for a charity project again. "I would have no hesitation in doing something similar in the future. I wholeheartedly recommend the Work the World project to other people," Catie said. Anisha has caught the bug for dental volunteering abroad: "It is a life-changing experience, but I hope it is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience as the cliché goes, as I would love to repeat it!"

The facilities were basic but serviceable.