Dental Volunteers for Israel (DVI)

By Sandra Jennings, RDH

Dear Members,

A few months ago, as I was surfing the Internet, I came across a web site called Dental Volunteers for Israel (DVI). Located at www.interdent.co.il/clinics/dvi/dvi.html It seemed quite interesting to me, so I looked into it a little further, and eventually volunteered in the program itself. I would like to share this great experience with you!

DVI is a non-profit, apolitical organization, founded in 1980 by Trudi Birger, who remains President of the organization.

DVI provides free dental and preventive care to Jerusalem’s underprivileged Jewish, Palestinian and Christian children including many new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia.

Because dental care is only available privately in Israel, it is limited to those who can pay fees — which can sometimes be hefty. In addition, preventive care education is almost nonexistent, being given little attention in the schools or media. Lacking the alternatives that we have in Canada, for example, these disadvantaged youngsters have been subject to serious and painful oral problems, that is, of course, before DVI opened its doors twenty years ago.

Patients are referred to the clinic by the city’s Social Welfare Department. The clinic is staffed throughout the year primarily by volunteer dentists and dental hygienists from twelve countries, who come at their own expense for a two to four week “working holiday”. The clinic operates six modern dental surgery units daily and one preventive care clinic treating up to 150 children between the ages of five to eighteen daily.

Unfortunately for us, dental hygienists are mainly limited to doing fissure sealants. Dentists are given priority for acceptance as volunteers because of the wider range of their training and accreditation.

The program is extremely well organized and once children become DVI patients, the primary focus is on prevention. The program is organized to ensure that children do not just come in whenever a tooth hurts to get it treated. They come in regularly, every six months for a routine check-up. If the dentist notices problems with oral hygiene, the child is reassessed in the prevention clinic for education and support in areas such as home care, nutritional habits and dental knowledge.

Whenever I had a few minutes in between patients, I would head out to the prevention clinic to see how they went about educating the children and their parents. I must admit to being really impressed! It was an example of “textbook perfection”. Approximately twelve people (children and their parents) at a time were taught all they needed to know about good oral health, from the role of bacteria or the consequences of eating sugar to the importance of proper oral health practices. For me, observing this was the highlight of my trip!

The educator handed out Oral B and G.U.M. toothbrushes to the kids and got them to brush their own teeth, as they would do in their own home. Afterwards the educator investigated how well they had brushed their teeth. She then showed them particularly how to brush the plaque areas.

What impressed me the most was how the educator had the whole room practically “in a trance” and completely focused on what she had to teach them.
My volunteer holiday was a great opportunity for me for professional review, while, at the same time, getting me thinking about possible strategies I could use in order to offer optimum quality treatment to my own patients. There's always something to learn. As long as we can keep an open mind and a desire to assimilate new information, we can only become better professionals.

I would definitely recommend this experience to anyone interested in volunteering their time and making a difference. During my stay in Jerusalem, my working schedule was four days a week for six hours each day, which allowed me lots of time outside work to see both the city and Israel itself too.

While you pay your own fare to Israel, DVI will provide an apartment during your stay. While I was there, for example, I had a nice apartment practically around the corner from the President, Ehud Barak!

If you have any questions about my experience, feel free to e-mail me at sandrajennings@hotmail.com, or call me at 076 332 4976 or 032 322 5476.

If you wish to contact DVI, contact Trudi Birger in person. You can e-mail her at dvi@internet-zahav.net, or write to her at DVI, 29 Mekor Chaim Street, Jerusalem 93465, Israel, or phone her at (02) 678 3101 or (02) 678 3144. DVI can also be faxed at (02) 678 8173.

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Guatemala: Blood, Sweat, and Tears

By Donna Kittle, B.Sc., RDH

“I felt sorry for the little kids, some of their mouths stank and their teeth were black and rotten right down to the gum line”, exclaimed John Wittnebel, go-for volunteer with Kindness In Action Service Society of Alberta, Group II Guatemala.

Kindness In Action is a Canadian registered not-for-profit charity, consisting mostly of Canadian and American dental professionals and other volunteers. From its inception as an idea over a cup of tea in 1993, Kindness In Action has grown to include about 100 volunteers this year. Four dental mission teams experienced the annual trek to Central America during January 2000. The four working locations this year included: the Danli-El Pariaso area of Honduras; Roata, Bay Islands-Honduras; Chajul, Guatemala; and villages between Antigua to Panajachel, Guatemala.

The motivation uniting all those who volunteer with Kindness In Action is the desire to help those with less in the developing world and the belief in the dignity of all people including their right to basic human needs. The volunteers work without compensation and many of them work in conditions that require them to put aside their own rights to basic human needs. The volunteers work without compensation and are responsible for their own expenses including airfare and accommodation.

This year, over 2,037 dental patients were treated. We provided free basic bare-bones dental services including: 2,795 extractions, 501 restorations, 374 cleanings, 73 sets of dentures, and many oral hygiene instruction demonstrations. Other professionals also provided 205 eye examinations and distributed eyeglasses.

Proactive treatment in third world countries is of utmost importance. This includes the provision of toothbrushes and instruction of basic oral hygiene. A child in Guatemala does not receive a toothbrush until Grade One. Most of the children would laugh and giggle as we placed toothbrushes in their tiny hands. After we showed them how to brush using our toothbrushes in our mouths, they would finally catch on. With basic toothbrush instructions, we are helping prevent the consequences of rampant dental decay.

“Amazingly, within 20 minutes of arriving, we can turn a bare room into a dental clinic”, said Dr. Loreen Distifano, Group II Guatemala. Without expectations, volunteers roll up their sleeves and tackle the job at hand, delivering basic dental care as a unified team. With respect, tolerance, flexibility, commitment, and patience, each team gels together. It is not an easy task working in a, sometimes literally, grass-roots environment with strangers you have just met. Often resembling a M.A.S.H. unit, our dental teams use whatever supplies and resources are available to deal with new challenges. Over the years, our creative dental groups have dealt with lost luggage, missed connections for equipment transfers, broken-down buses, challenging accommodations, cold showers, stolen supplies and equipment, and the destruction of hurricane Mitch, which resulted in some areas of Honduras having to set up dental missions from scratch again.

Patients sit in a wooden chair or lay on a table or bench with a green garbage bag duck-taped to the side. This is the spit bag! One member of the Escoupa Groupo, (the Spit Group) as we are affectionately known by our Spanish amigos, determines the problem and delivers relief while the other holds a flashlight, runs for instruments, beckons the translator to come quickly, or holds a trembling hand. “It is amazing how