

“What Volunteer Dentistry Has Done For Me.”

A perspective from a Dentist, World Oral Health Provider, Super Dentist & Friend

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I have been asked by Dr. Bob Fulton to impart a short discourse concerning “what volunteer dentistry has done for me.”



I think the best way for me to portray how this work has changed my life is to relay some examples of situations I have encountered on my travels:

In El Salvador, after having completed a couple of anterior endodontic procedures and several large anterior restorations, my young male patient saw his face in a mirror, started crying, and hugged me while asking his family to take pictures of the two of us. I had restored not only his smile, but his self-esteem.

In Belize, I worked on school children who were fearful of what to expect from the foreign female dentist. On my last day in that clinic, two kids stood on my dental stool while holding onto my shoulders and watching me work on a fellow classmate. They implored their mate not to be afraid of “the pic” and to behave while I placed several amalgam restorations. Although the clinic had a functioning autoclave, the local government dentist refused to follow proper asepsis protocol. I informed him that “we don’t work that way in Canada.” I did my own clean up. I led by example.

In Guatemala a woman I had seen earlier that morning brought me a black plastic bag. I thanked her in a perfunctory manner and put it aside. I continued working on my patient at that moment. Later, I opened the bag to discover a carefully wrapped present, complete with bow. She had given me a couple of hand crafted Guatemalan souvenirs. I cried. For me, these

trips are all about the work, but I should have taken the time to thank her properly. I learned something about myself; I didn’t like what I saw.

In Kenya, my retired classmate from dental school came along as my assistant. She had let her license go. “R” had managed a practice with over 50 employees. She was used to being “in charge.” After we both put our egos aside, we got on with the work. We made an incredible team. We worked with a lawn chair propped up on bricks, with multiple cushions and a travel pillow. Our dental unit (worth \$3500 US) was one the director of a different NGO had lent me. He said “The units were purchased to be used and not stored.” Our set up was a safety nightmare with satisfactory ergonomics. We both learned something about ourselves. R has reinstated her license purely to come on more of these trips.

On that same trip, R and I worked with an interpreter who disclosed to us the hardships of life in rural Kenya. His family of eight had to walk 3 km. to retrieve drinking water. They bathed in a nearby river and lived in a one room edifice with a dirt floor. He disclosed to us the corruption within the church system he was a part of. We gained his confidence.

In Jamaica, I worked on a female gunshot victim. She had teeth that were shattered subgingivally in both the first and fourth quadrants. Initially, she was trembling uncontrollably. I was afraid to touch her. I opted to extract the maxillary teeth that day, and have her come back 2 days later to do the mandibular teeth. I was terrified of overwhelming her and contributing to her trauma. Two days later a different person got into the dental chair calmly and with a smile on her face. When we were done, she hugged me and we both cried. Another dentist in the clinic came by and told me some people were specifically requesting to see me. It was sweet of him to tell me this.