

A Tent in the Kalahari

A Dental Service learning Trip

What kind of an event involves at least 200 emails sent and received, 8 meetings, almost a ton of equipment and supplies, 85 hrs. of travel, and 14 tents?



From June 12-28, 2016, eleven people from Loma Linda University, School of Dentistry (LLUSD) participated in a service learning trip to Africa. Our team had been invited to come to Botswana, by the administration of Kanye Adventist Hospital in Kanye, Botswana to provide restorative, and surgical dental care for people and begin preventative programs for school aged children. Our tent-clinic was located in the tiny, remote town of Mabutsane in the Kalahari Desert. Indeed we were told that our visit there would be the first and last time that most of the people of that area would have access to dental care. The US component of the team consisted of dental faculty members, dental students, dental hygiene students, an International Dental Program student, and a pediatric dental resident. The Botswanan part of the team included a dentist, two dental therapists, and dental assistants. In addition, a number of the support people from Kanye Adventist Hospital, volunteered their time to cook, translate, and fill many other support roles.



Funds granted by the Academy of Dentistry International Foundation and other organizations as well as contributions by the volunteers and Loma Linda School of Dentistry made this trip possible.

The Botswana professionals provided most of the extraction care and the LLUSD team was able to concentrate more on restorative and preventative treatment. We treated 500 patients, providing more sophisticated dental procedures than are often offered on humanitarian trips and we did multiple procedures on most patients amounting to full mouth care for many. The US component cared for 230 children and 70 adults. Children arrived from six different schools for dental restorations, caries arresting treatments, sealants, fluoride varnish, and a few endodontic procedures. The totals for both minors and adults were 85 surfaces of amalgam, 90 surfaces of Composite, 780 sealants, 65 extractions (simple to surgical), 34 patients treated with prophylaxis treatment and 30 with scaling and root planing. Fluoride varnish was placed for 20 patients. The students also received hygiene treatment and most were instructed in dental home care and given toothbrushes. One of the more rewarding treatments was restoring anterior broken incisors. A number of people in that environment had met with trauma and it was such a joy to restore these teeth with composite and see the joyous smiles of people who felt that their mouths were whole again, sometime after years of debilitation. A mobile X-ray unit and endodontic capability, helped ensure that necrotic teeth were properly treated and would likely be healthy into the future.



Because the only guesthouses or hotels are many hours away, we slept, ate, and treated patients in tents which were organized and pitched by the hospital personnel. Thanks to them I we were quite comfortable, healthy, and safe in the tiny, very modest town of Mabutsane in which our camp was located. The temperatures dropped to the very low 40's (°F) at night so a nightly campfire, water heated over the fire, and plenty of blankets were necessary. Besides the large tent that housed our clinic, and there was another in which to eat and another in which the kitchen crew worked. In addition there was a whole village of small tents used as residences, storage, HIV testing, and other uses for the nine days that we were there.

It is such a joy for us to answer a request for service when the need is so great and well recognized! In addition, it is a pleasure to work with like-minded professional who are involved and invested in the work and who are committed to continuing the work into the future. We enjoyed the cross cultural exchange, learning essential words in Setswana, trying new foods and menus, and learning new ways of thinking and perceiving the world. We grew close to those good people who cooked, cleaned, organized, drove, and made arrangements. We were tapped to do some public speaking about dental health, prevention, and dental care to groups such as schools, the local police force, construction workers, and the chief and local government officials.



Many patients volunteered to participate in an international research program and answered questions about oral health, diet, and oral hygiene. This data will shed light on perceptions and expectations around the world and strengthen the Service Learning Program of Loma Linda School of Dentistry.

We were treated to a chance to walk to a small stand of special, wild-growing bushes to harvest some of the roots that have traditionally been used to chew into a fibrous, effective toothbrush used in times past to maintain good oral hygiene. These “chew sticks” have been used (as well as other substances such as charcoal, wood ashes, and clay) in different parts of Africa, and each natural environment has its own unique species of bush or tree that is used.

Kanye Seventh-day Adventist Hospital purchased two excellent mobile dental units and a strong dental compressor. Using this equipment along with two dental chairs and the materials that we left for that purpose, they have committed to travel to this same region, twice each year to continue the preventative work that we have started. In this way the children of future generations will be afforded the care and attention that it is expected to result in improved oral health.



At the end of our stay, just before we departed for almost three days of enjoying natural Africa in Chobe National Game Park and Victoria Falls, we had to say good bye to our good friends, to whom we had grown so close. There were plenty of tears and hugs as we took our leave, looking back at the place of so much work and so much fun. We continue to pray today for the people who showed us so much kindness and for the patients that we were able to care for, starting a reality of better health for generations to come.



We would like to thank the Academy of Dentistry International for financial support for this worthy program.