Providing dental care in war-torn Syria

Anna Farina reports on Syria Relief’s new oral healthcare project: the Mobile Dental Clinic

My work in Syria began three years ago. Being a mother of two little girls, I have been deeply affected by TV images of Syrian children living in awful conditions. In 2013, I decided to do something concrete to help them. For a couple of years I spent a few days every two months doing voluntary work in refugee camps at the Turkish-Syrian border, helping to distribute food and survival items and supporting children in schools. This year, after a 17-year career in banking, I decided to move full-time to the humanitarian sector and I joined Syria Relief to develop their operations in London.

Syria Relief has existed since the uprising began in 2011. It was founded by seven Syrian trustees, most of whom are doctors. The charity’s current focus and objective is to provide support and care to the eight million people who are internally displaced by the conflict. As well as offering emergency help, education and food security, Syria Relief has begun developing livelihood programmes which enable communities to become self-sustainable and self-sufficient again. In addition to our headquarters in Manchester, we have two offices in Turkey and five across Syria, where we employ more than 100 staff. Through our schools and hospitals we also provide jobs to more than one thousand people, from teachers to doctors.

Our new Mobile Dental Clinic is an important example of our work. In the past, we have supported a number of important medical projects including Bab Alawa Hospital (near the Turkish Border), maternity units in Aleppo and Idlib, two stationery prosthetic limb clinics, a mobile prosthetic limb clinic, and a mental health clinic in Turkey for children with post-traumatic disorders. However, last year we realised that we did not cover oral or craniofacial healthcare.

In the light of the mobile prosthetic limb clinic’s success, we conceived the Mobile Dental Clinic. The clinic is a large van containing a full dental surgery and space for equipment and instruments. The van was funded by English dentists, built and fitted out in the UK and then shipped to Turkey in a container. It entered Syria in October 2015.

A van is a viable option for providing medical care in a war zone for several reasons. For stranded survivors, who cannot travel due to their dangerous environment or mobility challenges, it is one of the only types of service which can reach them. It is also far smaller than a hospital, which is more visible, busier, and stationary: potentially making it a target during war time. Because dental and craniofacial treatments can all be provided from one room – using one chair – a spacious van is also an ideal context for providing such therapy.

Since the project launched in October 2015, our mobile dental clinic has reached over 500 patients. It mainly travels between Aleppo and Idlib, in the more densely populated north-western regions of Syria. The van is staffed by two dentists, a nurse and a driver, who live and travel with it. When off-duty, they stay in nearby hospitals for shelter. The staff provide dental check-ups for local citizens, but also more substantial reconstructive surgery for those who have been injured. Services are offered to anybody who needs them, regardless of their background. On average, the staff treat more men than women, and a third of the clinic’s patients have been younger than 12.

Supporting a van like this is costly. The project’s outgoings, which include dental materials and supplies; fuel and maintenance; salaries for dentists and staff; and administration and management fees, amount to a total of approximately £30,000 per year.

Dental Aid Week for Syria

Inspired editor Isabella Rocchietta is working with Anna Farina, Dr Sabena Bhuiyan and Dr Cleopatra Darwish, to organise ‘Dental Aid Week for Syria’ between 10 and 17 July 2016. As part of this initiative, dentists will be asked to donate three hours’ worth of their profits to support the mobile clinic. If you would like to help Syria Relief and the Mobile Dental Clinic to continue its journey inside Syria, join Isabella, Anna, Cleopatra and Sabena in their efforts and visit mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/dentalaidsyria to donate to the cause. Even the smallest contribution can make a big difference inside Syria.

If you would like to support Syria Relief’s work, please visit their website and donate: www.syriarelief.org.uk/get-involved