

## Stepping up to Meet a Great Need

**I**f you take the narrow view, it makes sense to advocate that it is better to do volunteer dental work at home within the U.S. borders because there is a great unmet need for dental care. However, in my opinion, the world view for volunteering outside the United States takes precedence for a variety of reasons.

There are many dentists, who, in their dental school youth, did mobile clinic adventures to the Central Valley of California. It was an experience like no other in terms of exposure to the dental needs of the migrant farm workers and their families. And, of course, not to be forgotten, wild nights of fun after a hard day's work. Ah, youth!

Many of those same dentists are now of a certain age and are decades-long veterans of dental practice and are in search of an adventure. The underlying altruistic concept has not been lost on them but the chance to use well-honed skills for good in Uganda or in the remote corners of Guatemala, for example, has a strong pull. It can be like turning the clock back 30 years mentally, though not physically, to say the least. I, for one, have never worked so hard as on these trips. For example, two dentists working without electricity or running water extracted 218 teeth in 3½ days. That is way more work than is done at home in the same time period. At the end of those days: Party, no! Bed, yes!

The downside, as I see it, is that there is a certain hit-and-run aspect to the volunteer trips. It is as though there are endless needs to be met and just a moment in which to address them. It is frustrating to go on a volunteer dental trip and only be able to relieve pain by extracting teeth, and know that nothing else will be done until another volunteer group shows up to do what it can. In a way, it is an unbroken cycle of need without much hope for improvement.

Beyond the unmet dental needs there is a greater need, as I see it, the lack of potable water and the impact of that on overall health. There are groups who focus on the water problem and how to obtain and deliver potable water to the population. The success of such projects can be far reaching both from a medical and dental standpoint.

So, after some repeat experience on foreign dental trips you ask yourself, "Why do it?" But then, because you are a dentist of a certain age and experience, and you welcome the adventure and the small bit of help you can give, you sign up again for another trip. Maybe Tanzania next time.

For those itching for an adventure, the American Dental Association will hold a volunteer symposium just prior to the annual meeting Oct. 14-15 in Las Vegas. Attending this symposium just might be the first step to a new professional adventure.

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