

Dental Assisting ⁱⁿ Guatemala by Tammy Vanderbeek, RDA

For four years I have had the awesome opportunity to volunteer as a dental assistant in Guatemala. This opportunity came to me through one of the doctors that I work with: Dr. Brad Krusky, a pediatric dentist in Calgary. He was involved with a group called The Society for Third world Dental Care, which was founded by Dr. Dennis Bedard, from Edmonton. This group is now known as Dentistry for All (DFA).

Dr. Bedard became involved in dental care for the Guatemalan people in 1995, through a nursing group from the University of Alberta. The Society's work started modestly, treating just over 100 people that first year. In 2008 the Society for Third World Dental Care treated nearly 1000 people. The volunteers have recently returned from the 2009 mission, which was extremely successful, treating 1548 patients and performing 4007 procedures. A lot has changed in the 14 years that the Society has been going to Guatemala. Due to generous sponsors and donations, and a lot of fund raising, the Society now has equipment for sterilization, fully functional dental chairs and units, and compressors, which allow us to be completely mobile and efficient. In 1995 it was

100% extractions but the percentage is now about 30% extractions, 44% fillings, 18% cleanings and 8% other. We are able to do just about anything that can be done in a conventional dental office here in Canada. The difference of course is sometimes we are outside, with a dirt floor and a stump as an assisting chair!

This year DFA will start building a permanent dental clinic in Comitancillo, San Marcos. This is the first place that Dr. Dennis Bedard and his wife Bev worked and it continues to be the busiest location that DFA visits.

The role of a dental assistant changes daily when you are working in



Waiting for treatment at a school in Guatemala City.

Guatemala. I will share with you a bit of my daily journal, one day from each year that I volunteered; just a few experiences that can show how days can go while volunteering with a group like this.

April 11, 2005, the village of Hawaii, Guatemala

My first day of real work, we worked in the village of Hawaii. Very tropical "muy calor," no air conditioning and it must have been 40c and extremely humid! Sweat was just dripping off me; I didn't have a dry piece of clothing on me by the end of the day. Dr. Brad and I had a little girl in today, 4 years old, Maria. Very cute, except for her rotten teeth!

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March 30, 2006, the village of Chicijalaj

I was working out of town today in a small village called Chicijalaj. It was not a long drive, however there was a lot of miscommunication and we didn't seem to know where to go. Pedro, one of our interpreters and also a guide, had to get out of the vehicle and start asking people who were walking by where a certain house was. After a bit Pedro disappeared, and we were left sitting by the trucks on the side of a narrow dirt road. Somewhere between 15 minutes to a half hour later Pedro came back and knew where we had to go. Back into the trucks and a short 10 to 15 minute drive and we were where we needed to be, well, sort of. We have 4X4 trucks, but in this village not even those could get us all the way. We had to hike the equipment down a very uneven dirt path. The dirt was loose and I slipped a few times. It was only about 200 yards, but not easy. We were to work in a home that they had moved everything out so that we could have space. It had two floors, the bottom floor had a ceiling that was only about 5'10" so some of the taller members of the team could not stand up straight and the doorway was even shorter, with a wood plank at the top, that at least 3 people hit their heads on. Out our window was a very noisy sheep that bleated all day. It wasn't a crazy busy day. The people of the village served us lunch, which they quite often did. Soup, we were just getting started

eating when Peter [a physician from the Calgary area] and [Dr.] Brad made a bit of a discovery, the bits floating in the soup which we had originally thought was some sort of a spice, wasn't—they were bugs, lots and lots of little aphid type bugs. [this is a typical meal for the villagers and they were going without so that they could feed us] so I gave it my best try and ate most of the soup, I left the cauliflower, which I was sure was the origin of the bugs. In the afternoon only one person came. It was a woman [she was probably in her 60's, we don't know her name] who had come at the clinic when I was working with Dr. Dennis. She wanted all of her teeth out; Dr. Brad gave the same answer that Dr. Dennis had—he would only take out the bad ones. She wasn't overly happy. We finished early and started to haul everything back up the hill (down was easier)! In her closing thank you speech, the same woman who wanted all her teeth out, told us via translation from Mam [a Mayan dialect] to Spanish and then Spanish to English, that she hopes we will be back

next year to take out all of her teeth—she added if she is still alive. Lucky for me a very cold shower was waiting for me, after a long dusty day!

March 12, 2007, the shanty town of Santa Isabella

Today was a gong show, just about anything and everything that could go wrong did.

We got up early about 6 am. Had our breakfast of eggs and beans. Our guides to get us through the city and to the shanty town of Santa Isabella were to be here to get us at 7 am, we waited until after 8 for them to get here, only an hour late. Then we hit traffic!! The worst rush hour traffic I'd seen in a long time. Imagine 14 St



Hauling equipment back up the hill at the end of the day.

SW [Calgary], when there has been an accident on the 14 St Glenmore overpass!!

We finally arrived and started to set up and the first problem came up- no lid for one of the suction bottles of one of the dental units. Wade [Wade was our general handy man; he could and did fix everything for us.] and [Dr.] Rob Meloff started

making a makeshift one. We had only worked for a few hours when we lost a compressor, and the sterilizer blew. The smell was like burning hair.

With only one compressor we had to alternate using the suctions and hand pieces on our dental units.

Dr. Brad had an extraction on a woman that the tooth broke at the gum line, he worked for over an hour, and then Dr. Rob [a general dentist from Calgary] came to help and was able to get the root out. This poor woman, she was so worried. Thankfully the day ended, only about 2 hours behind schedule.

It is hard to imagine when you are in your own home with all your conveniences that we have, that a trickle of water (luke warm) could feel so good! [I am talking about the shower.]

March 2008, the village of Comitancillo

[This year I brought along my 17 year old daughter Jessica.]

The road to Comitancillo was very winding and bumpy I was glad



Tammy working outside at the clinic in El Ramate.

to get there. Jessica and I were able to sleep in our fly infested room after Rod [a retired Safeway manager from Edmonton, helps sterilize etc.] sprayed it with raid and we hung up flypaper, some of the rest I killed with my shoe. I slept with my hood over my head. We were serenaded with the sweet sounds of dogfights, and into the early morning with the crowing of roosters and the gobbling of a fat turkey. (Apparently the turkey will be dinner on Wednesday night!) In spite of very little sleep I was glad to get up and start the day, poor Jessica, she tells me that when I was sleeping I was snoring!

Worked in town today. I was the only dental assistant with 4 dentists—very busy—running between Dr's. Jessica, who was sterilizing our instruments, had Mary Anne helping her out today which was good. Mary Anne has been on many of these missions. One of our patients today, about a 40 year old man, had a terrible gag reflex and ended up vomiting all over himself, the floor and a bit on Charlie [a pediatric Resident

from Wisconsin]. Not the highpoint of the day!

Tomorrow we go out of town to one of the more remote villages, should be another adventure!

People from all walks of life have helped bring dental care to the people of Guatemala. It takes all kinds of people to make up a good team and this includes

dental assistants. If you get the opportunity to do this type of work I highly recommend it. It is very rewarding. 🌍

Tammy has been in the dental assisting profession since 1985, and is currently employed at a Pediatric dental office in Calgary. If you would like any information about Dentistry for All (DFA) please contact Dr. Brad Krusky at yoyopedo@shaw.ca or soon at www.dentistryforall.org. On Saturday, November 14, 2009, DFA will host its 6th Annual Guate-Gala fundraiser and requests your support.