

The Road to Comi

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Richard Halpern completed a degree in dentistry at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon in 2007 and advanced pediatric dental training at the Winnipeg Children's Hospital in 2009. Halpern earned an MSc at the University of Louisville in Kentucky in 2010 and will begin an MSc in Orthodontics at the University of Manitoba in July. He now provides dentistry to northern Manitoba native communities.

Each spring since 2008, I have spent between two and four weeks in remote regions of Guatemala with the volunteer organization Dentistry For All/Odontologia Para Todos.

The reward I receive for climbing winding, unpaved, bumpy roads for hours—repeatedly falling on my seat—in the Western Highlands of Guatemala is to reach regions and provide care where no other dentists do.

We set up our clinic in Comitancillo (Comi), the town centre for about 55 smaller surrounding communities. These communities have no regular dental services except for when our dental team visits, as it has since 1996. The team comprises 17 volunteers, including seven dentists. Each day, half our group remains in Comi while the other half heads to a farther-removed community. When we arrive in these outlying villages, we're greeted by a fleet of men, women and children eagerly waiting to help us unpack three pick-up trucks full of supplies and help set up our mobile dental clinic.

The people we treat place their names on a waiting list well in advance, often suffering for months in pain. For most residents, a visit to a Guatemalan dentist would take days to reach and is unaffordable: a root canal could cost



Above: A Dentistry For All mobile dental clinic in a courtyard in one of the outlying communities of Comitancillo, Guatemala.



Left: Richard Halpern with an appreciative Guatemalan patient.

a family a quarter of its yearly salary. We charge a relatively small fee, and we donate the funds to a local self-run community development association. We pay for the cost of delivering treatment with sponsorship, fundraisers and each team members' financial contributions.

Through the organization's 16 years, we have advanced from pulling teeth to doing fillings, cleanings and root canals. Most of the people of Comitancillo have never learned proper dental care, and so we now support an individual who provides oral health education and preventive services throughout the year. Our group is also preparing to build a permanent clinic in Comi.

I remember the first time I looked in a patient's mouth, during my first trip in 2008, and saw, to my surprise, three corners of his teeth full of cavities but one corner with proper fillings. I soon learned that the patient was on the four-year treatment plan: for each annual visit, he was allotted enough time with

the dentist to get one corner of his teeth treated.

Sometimes when I show up at the clinic and see a seemingly endless line of patients, many of whom have been waiting since 2 a.m., and realize we won't have enough time to treat them all, I wonder if my efforts make a difference. Then I think of the time I saw an elderly patient, missing many of her teeth, reclined in my dental chair with the back of her wrist on her forehead, laboured breathing and a swollen left cheek, pointing to a badly broken tooth. I listened to one translator interpret her words from Mam—the local language—to Spanish, and then a second person translate from Spanish to English. Looking at her facial expression, I understood her grief. While removing her abscessed tooth seemed like a drop in the ocean, the amount of thank-yous and bless-yous I received from that patient reminded me of the ripples that my drop makes across the ocean.

My education has allowed me to make a difference. With it also comes the responsibility to use my knowledge and skills to improve the lives of others. I thank the people of Comitancillo for inspiring me. ■