

# Dentistry with a difference: volunteering for 'Dental Project Peru'

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As a young dentist looking for new challenges and experiences, **Mary Bussell** decided to use her skills and training by volunteering for a dental charity working in Peru. Here she gives an account of her 'dental adventure'.

As a young dentist, with a variety of experience and looking for a new challenge, I decided to volunteer for 'Dental Project Peru'. 'Dental Project Peru' is a registered charity which was set up in 2003 by Jacqueline Kotula. Jacqueline spent time travelling in South America and became inspired by Peru and its people; initially she worked independently providing emergency dental treatment. Following her success she set up the charity, which is dependent on dental volunteers.

The charity now organises five trips each year, working in remote areas to serve some of Peru's poorest people. It aims to provide emergency dental care and also oral health education. For example, the people of the Apurimac region of Peru live high up in the Andes (3,000-5,000 m). Some villages have no access by road and certainly no means of accessing dental care.

I went on the 19th trip of this charity, and was part of a team of five (two dentists from the UK, one Peruvian dentist, a translator and a driver). On September 9 2007 we set off on an eight-day dental adventure.

## A DENTAL ADVENTURE

We travelled for eight hours along a dirt track up and over the Andes, to reach the villages where we worked. Surgeries were set up in health posts, and three 'communities' were visited during our trip. All of the equipment (which is owned by 'Dental Project



The truck used to transport the volunteers and dental equipment



Dental equipment

Peru) had travelled with us, on the back of the truck. We had three folding dental chairs, a compressor and mobile dental unit, dental instruments, local anaesthetic – surprisingly most things you would find in a well-equipped UK dental surgery!

The three communities that we visited had been notified previously. By the time we were able to set up our surgery, we had a large queue of patients outside! Many of the people were in pain and much in need of our care. We saw adults and children; most patients had multiple carious teeth and pulpitic type pain. We also saw patients with infection, dental abscesses and also an infected epidermal cyst. We were able to provide basic dental treatment, ranging from simple restorations to surgical extractions.

The local language is Quechua, although the majority of people also speak Spanish and it was through Spanish, or our translator, that we communicated with our patients. Few words are needed for someone to express pain and also their gratitude for the treatment they received.

These communities were very remote, with sporadic supplies of water and electricity. Visiting them was like travelling back in time. However, despite no access by road and limited energy and water supplies, surprisingly, carbonated drinks are still available to them. These products are brought from neighbouring towns and traded for local produce such as potatoes. There is little oral health education and it is these sources of processed foods and refined sugars that are the most likely cause of the dental caries. Without access to care, dental caries quickly progresses to involve the pulp and eventually becomes a source of infection.

There was a plentiful supply of patients and each day we worked from early in the morning until sunset. The treatment and pain relief we provided was greatly needed by these people, however it was also important to provide education to allow awareness of oral health. At each community, oral health education was provided to all of the school children and they were each given a toothbrush. During our visit alone, 760 toothbrushes were given to local children.



Mary providing oral hygiene instruction to a patient



A typical Peruvian family who attended for dental treatment

It was a very unique experience of dentistry, working with a head-torch to provide light and sometimes without a supply of water or electricity. At times when we were without electricity, restoring teeth was difficult as we could only use hand excavation. Working without water increased the challenge of cleanliness. The project has a portable autoclave, so all instruments are sterile when used. The majority of treatment provided was extraction, although hopefully with time as the message gets across, more teeth will be saveable.

During the six days we saw 345 patients (207 females, 138 males). The average age of the patient was 21 years. A total of 460 teeth were extracted.

### HELPING THOSE IN NEED

In the last community I saw a female patient, who had walked for over three hours to receive dental care. She had multiple carious retained roots, from which she suffered pain and infection. I removed 14 roots from this patient, under local anaesthetic. It is likely that for this procedure many of

our UK patients would wish to have a general anaesthetic.

I also extracted a tooth from a patient outside, where my large rucksack served as a dental chair, and the sunshine as light. This was the last tooth I extracted during the trip and is one I shall always remember. I was able to use my skills as a dentist to help someone in need, in the most unique setting – on top of the Andes.

'Dental Project Peru', like similar charities, works hard to provide a source

of pain relief to patients who otherwise would have no access to such care. These patients suffer months of dental pain often with severe odontogenic infections. Living in the busy and competitive westernised world, it is often easy to take for granted the resources and opportunities surrounding us. Volunteering, giving up your time, money and using your skills to help other people is very rewarding.

'Dental Project Peru' is a superb way of combining your dental skills with

challenge and adventure. It's not an easy 'holiday', but a very worthwhile and unforgettable experience. If you would like to find out more, or make a donation to the charity, please visit their website at [www.dentalprojectperu.org](http://www.dentalprojectperu.org).

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