‘I have never experienced patients so keen to receive dental care’

An insight into the work of UK dental volunteers in the Philippines and interview with volunteer **Ruth Potterton**, a dental hygienist and therapist.

This summer a team of dental professionals travelled to the Philippines where they treated hundreds of children in a joint mission with two other UK charities.

Four Dentaaid volunteers joined teams from Team Rubicon and Serve On for the trip to Umapad Elementary school in Cebu. Many of the pupils at the school live on or near the city's dump site and have to scavenge to help provide for their families. The area is also affected by earthquakes and recent tremors have damaged buildings and infrastructure.

The Dentaaid team of Mark Inman, Rob Witton, Ruth Potterton and Joy Baker treated 383 children including many who had been suffering long-term dental pain and needed

extractions. They also applied fluoride varnish to 185 children's teeth and gave oral health education presentations to 532 youngsters. Sadly many of the children had severe decay and long queues formed to see the dental team as access to dental care in the area is very limited.

The team also visited Cebu University to meet students learning English and went to a dental school to establish links with a new generation of dentists in the Philippines.

Operation Katimbang – taken from the local word for unity – saw the three British charities working alongside each other for the first time. Serve On provided training and support for the emergency services in Cebu and taught children and staff what to do if a natural disaster strikes. Volunteers from Team Rubicon rebuilt and refurbished classrooms that were damaged

during a recent tremor, transforming them into bright, cheerful spaces.

The dental team had to rely on basic hand instruments, plastic chairs and headtorches as they screened and treated hundreds of children but said they had never seen patients so keen to receive dental care.

Dentaaid volunteer Ruth Potterton, a dental hygienist and therapist, said: ‘We were totally in love with the children from Umapad school who were so polite and well mannered. The levels of decay were high and sadly lots of teeth had to be extracted. The country and the people were wonderful and 21 people from three different organisations have worked together selflessly towards one goal. I would highly recommend volunteering; it has been a wonderful experience’.

Volunteer profile

BDJ Team spoke to Ruth to find out more about her background in dentistry and her experiences on the volunteering trip to the Philippines.

Name: Ruth Potterton

Age: 39

Job titles: (I have three!) Lecturer in Community Based Dentistry; Dental hygienist/Dental therapist; Clinical Supervisor

Hometown: Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

Current town: Okehampton, Devon

Places of work: (Again there are three!) Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine & Dentistry, Oasis Dental Care and Harwood Dental Practice

How did you first become involved in dentistry?

I was dentally phobic as a child and when as a family we moved to Devon and changed dental practice, I was inspired by my new dentist. I knew from the age of seven years I wanted some form of career in dentistry. I began full time hospital training in London as a dental nurse aged 18.

When did you qualify as a dental hygienist and therapist?

In 2004 from Queen Mary University of London, Barts & The London School of Medicine & Dentistry.

What appealed to you about being a dental hygienist and therapist?

I had worked as a dental nurse within an Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery department and had successful career progression over four years post qualification. I found myself as a Dental Nurse Manager for the department and quickly realised being office based was not my passion and I wanted to get back to patient care and the practical aspects of a career I loved. I was working in a large dental teaching hospital, surrounded by dedicated dental undergraduates and I was eagerly wanting to be the person undertaking the treatment, not the observer. I decided it would be a step backwards relinquishing my managerial position to return to practical dental nursing and decided I should expand my horizons. Training as a dental hygienist and therapist was the obvious career step for me.

What do you enjoy about your job?

The fabulous people I get to meet, treat and work alongside. I am extremely privileged in that my working week is varied due to having three part time positions. I am still very much hands-on and work clinically in two dental practices and am passionate about working to try and improve the oral health of the patients within my care. I am also fortunate to be part of a team teaching undergraduate dental

projects with local community organisations, supporting and aiming to improve the health and oral health of marginalised groups, and as a Lecturer in Community Based Dentistry I am involved with this teaching. In April each year our students get to present their work during a Symposium and Andy was a member of our expert panel assessing the student projects. During a coffee break he mentioned to me the forthcoming mission to the Philippines, that there was one space left for a hygienist/therapist and without hesitation I jumped at the chance to put my name forward. Before I knew it, it was confirmed and I didn't look back!

What did you have to do to prepare for the trip?

The Dentaaid team couldn't have been any more supportive. Formalities such as registration, occupational health assessment, paying for flights and obtaining a visa to work overseas were quickly undertaken. Obviously you have to evidence your identity, professional status and experience but this is very quickly achieved securely online and Dentaaid lead you through this process. I had to request time off from my three employers and I couldn't have asked them to be any more supportive than they were! Additionally my patients were 100% behind me and were overly generous in their kindness and support.

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hygienists/therapists and dental students in my roles as lecturer and clinical supervisor. Sharing knowledge and supporting the development of future dental professionals is extremely important to me.

How did you get involved in volunteering with Dentaaid?

Purely by chance. My undergraduate colleagues will back me when I say volunteering with Dentaaid had been on my bucket list since dental hygiene and therapy school, however, there had always been reasons not to act upon it: finances and timing being the two main reasons. Fast forward 15 years and I found myself being introduced to Andy Evans, CEO of Dentaaid. At Peninsula Dental School our undergraduates undertake community based health intervention

The most important thing I needed to do was fundraise as the cost of volunteering quickly adds up, especially when it is your first mission.

Costs incurred included: obtaining the required vaccinations for the country, anti malarials, flights, personal kit, personal insurance and professional indemnity, UK transfers and in-country expenses (although these are usually fairly inexpensive) transport, food, licence/visa to work etc.

Flights are booked for you, and consideration is given to the most suitable UK airport, although it is highly recommended that the team fly together as it is a perfect bonding opportunity.

As a volunteer you are also asked to collect donations of dental consumables and materials for the mission. In our case aside from gloves,

the most valuable item was toothbrushes and we took over 1,000 with us to hand out during our oral health education sessions.

This mission, I was told, was slightly different to most traditional Dentaaid trips in that our small dental team of four (two dentists, a dental nurse and myself) would be working with two other UK charities: Team Rubicon UK [TRUK] and Serve On, to help Umapad Elementary School which serves a slum area that has been devastated by earthquakes, large fires and damage from recent typhoon activity. The three charities would work in partnership to carry out vital repairs to the school, support students and teachers with training in English and earthquake survival skills, work with local emergency first responders to improve their search and rescue expertise and provide much needed dental care and oral health education. Due to this collaborative nature, our Dentaaid team was invited to the Team Rubicon UK HQ in Wiltshire for a training day. This was a perfect opportunity to meet other members of the whole team (21 people in total), receive briefings on deployment, operational support, safety, medical training, security and communications. TRUK also provided us with their kit list so another shopping trip was required!

Had you travelled to this area before?

No, the Philippines is the furthest I have travelled.

How did you find the experience?

Without hesitation truly amazing and thoroughly rewarding. Our mission was called Operation Katimbang (Cebuano for 'unity') and there honestly was a coming together of three teams within this unit. Every member of the volunteer team I worked with was totally amazing. All 21 people, likeminded and selflessly working for the same end goal despite representing three different organisations.

I have never experienced patients so keen to receive dental care, literally crowding at the doorway and pushing to get in, all day long, every day. We found long queues formed from before 7 am once word had spread within the community that we were there and these people waited patiently for us to arrive just before 9 am and start work. Some would wait all day with the hope of being treated and then return the next day to do it all again if they hadn't been treated or even if they had and they had more painful teeth remaining (350 permanent teeth were extracted by the two dentists).

The children from Umapad school were so polite and well mannered. The levels of tooth decay were extremely high and unfortunately many teeth had to be extracted (179 deciduous teeth) but they were keen to learn and accept

advice and education on how to improve oral health and diet (532 received OHI and 185 received topical fluoride application).

The Filipino people were wonderfully gracious and respectful towards us. Every morning the staff and school children greeted us with a cheery 'good morning', the children all keen to receive a high five and wanting to watch us work or talk to us. Those that had mobile phones or saw ours wanted selfies taken!

Truthfully I also rediscovered myself and my love for a career that I had chosen as a child. We can quite easily get caught up in the mundane of daily life and the challenging issues we are faced with day to day whilst trying to do our jobs. This experience allowed me to take a step back and re-evaluate.

How long were you there?

Fourteen days (including four days travelling.)

What challenges did you face?

That we couldn't do enough. So much more is needed to support and improve the oral health of just this one school, let alone looking wider afield.

Our makeshift clinic was a classroom that we had to clear and prepare before work could commence. Dental chairs were plastic patio chairs and a dustbin became a spittoon. A dental light is a head torch (which drains batteries, so take multiple spares!) and whilst we had some instruments, it was quite a limited range so be prepared to work in challenging conditions without adequate moisture control. Posture and correct positioning on multiple occasions goes out of the window so on many evenings back at base you would find members of the dental team laid out straight on the floor, stretching out their backs.

Some of our equipment was shipped out and hence there when we arrived, but the vast amount of instruments and consumables we had to carry ourselves, so allow space in hold luggage weight allowance for this.

Depending on the country you work in, the weather plays a part too. We were working in 35+ degree heat and humidity of 95% so even the simplest of activities is tiring. Luckily the roof in our classroom didn't leak, like so many others, because when it rained it really rained!

It was also challenging in that we had to rely on locals to support us in some instances (for example transportation to and from locations) and this would happen in 'Philippine time' so be

team was amazing. Everyone was interested in each other's roles, characteristics and reasons for being on the mission. There was a real team spirit and we all complemented each other. Evidence suggests when you combine different interventions you actually create greater impact. The sum is greater than the individual parts and that really is a great example in this case.

experience and personally I cannot wait for the next trip. I would advise anyone considering it to have at least a year or two's experience post qualification before putting yourself forward and don't go expecting a 'jolly' (382 patients

were treated, not including those receiving OHI and topical fluoride). It is hard work which is physically and emotionally taxing, but the rewards most definitely outweigh any negatives. You will laugh and cry and return with a head full of memories you will cherish forever.

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patient and respectful of cultural differences.

We also couldn't have achieved as much as we did without a translator, but even learning basic greetings, please and thank you, open, close and pain helped greatly.

What were your impressions of the people you met?

Truly wonderful. So humble, polite and respectful. The school children were so trusting, engaged and willing to learn. There is a cultural respect as well as a respect for elders and visitors which made our mission easier to undertake. Aside from the local people, the whole volunteer

Would you like to volunteer in the future?

Definitely, I am already saving for the next Dentaaid trip! Additionally I hope to return to the Philippines again; provisional plans are to return in the future to enhance the prevention programme in order to improve oral health and we made some good links with staff at one of Cebu's dental schools in order to achieve this.

Would you encourage other DCPs to volunteer?

I would sincerely highly recommend volunteering; it has truly been a wonderful

I certainly couldn't have undertaken this without the financial and emotional support of friends, family, colleagues and patients that helped get me there and benefit from this enriching experience.

Dentaaid has spaces left on its volunteering trips to Uganda, Zambia, Kenya and Cambodia in 2018. If you are interested, find out more at www.dentaaid.org/volunteering.

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