Crisis At Christmas Dental Service: Challenging, rewarding, and still necessary

BDJ board member and dental hygienist and therapist **Sarah Murray MBE**, on donating her time every year for those in need

The pandemic has forever changed how we live our lives. We have reassessed priorities, tailored our day-to-day living to accommodate financial and social constraints that COVID-19 has brought about – and hopefully made us all a little more empathetic. The virus has had devastating and far-reaching effects on the socioeconomic status of some of society's most vulnerable, of course. As a result of cutbacks and rises in the cost of living,

many people this year are facing a festive season unlike any other.

The financial crisis looks set to worsen throughout winter and the number of people teetering on the brink of losing their homes is of serious concern.

According to Crisis, the economic aftermath of COVID-19 risks a 'substantial rise in core homelessness, including rough sleeping, unless the government implements a range of housing and welfare mitigation interventions,

including continuing with emergency accommodation measures for those at risk of rough sleeping'.¹

Meanwhile, NHS dentistry is facing its own crisis – with gaps in the workforce thanks to low wages and Brexit restrictions, limited access to care, long waiting lists as well as the privatisation of practices.

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suggested that as many as 70% of homeless people experience dental problems, including pain and infections, and are often unaware of their rights to NHS dentistry. As a result, 15% of homeless people have pulled out their own teeth.²

Empathy is a key quality within dentistry. And nowhere is this more evident than in the number of dentists, dental hygienists and therapists and dental nurses who regularly give up their time to volunteer with projects aimed at getting some of society's most vulnerable people out of dental pain.

Importance to me

Every year for nine years (bar 2020 when COVID-19 halted operations) I have donated a few days of holiday to volunteer with the dental service for homeless people as part of Crisis at Christmas. My volunteering journey actually started after seeing an advert in the *BDJ*! Helping someone get out of pain to enjoy their turkey dinner, or seeing someone gain in confidence – possibly having had a haircut with the hairdressing team and being given fresh clothes, makes it all worthwhile. Feedback from the Crisis guests confirm the huge benefits regarding the dental service.

When I started at Crisis, the emphasis was on getting individuals, or 'guests' as they are known, out of pain. Over time, we have incorporated more perio treatments, and encouraged fluoride applications, in addition to oral hygiene support and samples. Guests now leave with donated toothbrushes and toothpaste to continue with their homecare.

The Crisis at Christmas Dental Service has been running since 1995. And, whilst it is unlikely it will take place this year, it will return in the future. It is usually open from 23–29 December to offer routine as well as emergency care. Daily numbers range between 60–80 guests, with some attending for a number of appointments throughout the week to ensure a course of treatment is completed. I'm fortunate and delighted that Oral-B will be making a donation on my behalf this year, which is amazing. It won't

replace me being there on the ground, but it will make a difference.

That's another reason I give my time – the service is not just for Christmas. The team also provide guests with a list of clinics where they can continue treatment long after the Crisis mobile units have closed their doors for the year.

And it's paying dividends, too. With many of the Crisis guests viewing the team of volunteers as their 'regular' dental practice, in many cases their oral health is good.

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The value of prevention cannot be underestimated for this group of individuals. There are a number who require extractions and root canal treatments, but these are declining year on year.

Challenges persist, but the rewards are worth it

The work is rewarding and challenging. Over the years I have been involved in the set-up and close down of the service as all the stock and equipment needs to be checked prior to usage, and storage for the next year. This is when friendships grow and blossom, as there is time to chat to colleagues. I also sign up to a number of shifts each year, which are full days with a group huddle at 8.30am and closing down the service around 6 o'clock.

But there are challenges. Often, they are self-inflicted – our nature is to want to provide all treatment for a guest, which is not feasible given the timeframe but, occasionally, the complexity of needs makes treatment difficult, too.

The fabrication of dentures used to be challenging but, thanks to the Den-Tech

charity team that now collaborates with Crisis to provide quick turnaround, same-day dentures for the homeless has proven a huge success.

And, although the vast majority of guests are British, there are many who are from Europe and elsewhere, so the Dental Service team aims to accommodate every guest with translated medical history sheets and follow up clinic details in their own language – no small feat when there are 40 countries of origin!

But it is these aspects that also make the experience all the more interesting. It is a very different working environment from most everyday settings, and, in my opinion, this can create excitement and boost enthusiasm with its multitude of treatments and the problem-solving skills required to deliver them.

Such experiences can reignite a lost spark of enthusiasm for a career as well as offer new opportunities. I have been lucky that my volunteering journey has taken me to the 2012 Paralympics, where I provided treatment, and one of my Crisis colleagues recently had an interview to volunteer at the upcoming 2022 Commonwealth Games.

We all joined our respective professions to care and help our communities, so these opportunities reinforce this. Coming home on the evening of Christmas Day and cooking my evening meal is all the tastier knowing I have given service to others during the day. Christmas Day is one of my favourite days to work at Crisis. Volunteering really does put the true spirit into Christmas; it is easy to lose sight of its importance when there is such a huge commercial element these days.

Want to share your story of volunteering? Email bdjinpractice@bda.org and we'll share some of the best ♦

References

1. Crisis. The Homelessness Monitor: England 2021. Available online at: www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2021/ (Accessed November 2021).
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