first person

CRISIS AT

first person:

CHRISTMAS

Although best known for the Christmas shelters, **Crisis**, the national charity for solitary homeless people, works year-round to help vulnerable and marginalised people get through the crisis of homelessness, fulfil their potential and transform their lives.

‘Homeless people, whether sleeping rough or in hostels, are highly likely to experience ill health. The Open Christmas provides access to doctors, opticians, chiropody, psychiatrists, and of course, dental clinics.’

Crisis was founded in 1967 and the first Open Christmas was held in 1972. It has evolved over the years from a simple one-day event to provide a Christmas dinner, to the huge week-long operation it is today. There are five shelters open in London between the 23rd and 30th December offering a range of services including housing and resettlement advice, clothing, food and entertainment, hairdressing, arts and crafts and healthcare.

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Liz Deuchars, a Warrant Officer dental hygienist in the Royal Army Dental Corps, shares her experiences volunteering for Crisis.

‘I first became involved with Crisis Open Christmas in 1996 after reading an appeal for volunteers in *‘The Big Issue’*. At that time, 1 in 4 of the homeless rough sleepers in London were ex-Service personnel and I wanted to do something to help. Financial donations are always gratefully received by Crisis but for the homeless person, meeting volunteers who are happy to give up their time to help means a lot – it shows that people do care about them and will treat them as a person.

Back in 1996, the dental service that was provided was fairly basic but still the only chance of treatment for many homeless guests. A Contessa chair had to be manhandled into the warehouse that was being used as the shelter and the domestic electricity

and plumbing couldn't cope with the demands of the dental equipment. A couple of years later, we had the use of a mobile dental unit (MDU) and then since Christmas 2000, (thanks to the Defence Dental Agency) we have been able to borrow the Ardcats field dental equipment.

Now we can run two surgeries - the field dental unit is set up in the main shelter, while the MDU travels to the 4 smaller shelters during the week. Thanks to the improvement in the equipment, we can offer almost all routine treatments requested by the patients and arrange referrals to specialists if necessary. The only thing that will stop us providing treatment is when there are not enough volunteers to staff both facilities.

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Four years ago, I became the Dental Service organiser, ensuring that the service runs smoothly during the week and making the best use of our resources. The dental service is very popular and is usually kept busy. Last Christmas (23 - 30 Dec 03) we saw 176 patients and with at least half of them having two treatments eg a scale and polish plus a filling, over 200 treatments were recorded.

My biggest concern at Crisis Open Christmas is meticulous cross infection control. Over 50% of those treated said they had Hepatitis C and a significant number admitted to being HIV positive. All possible means are used to protect staff and patients. Protective and safety equipment is provided on site and a watchful eye kept to make sure everyone uses it correctly. Each operator (dentist or hygienist) has two assistants, a 'clean' nurse and a 'dirty' nurse to minimise contamination of materials. Once the chair-side assistant has touched the patient, the 'clean' nurse then does all mixing and collection of materials.

Volunteering for Crisis is a great way to spend a day or two over the festive season and all types of volunteers are welcome. In 2003, 1,200 people came to the Crisis Open Christmas shelters where 11,295 meals were served and 3,000 volunteers kept the whole thing running. The value of the volunteers' time was estimated at £600,000 for this one week alone. Financial help is welcome but nothing can compare with the time and skills that the volunteers give year after year.'

Liz Deuchars is currently serving in Wegberg, Germany involved in oral preventative dentistry and dental health promotion to the British Forces in Germany.

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Volunteering

This year **Crisis Open Christmas 2004** will be operating from 23 to 30 December.

If you are interested in volunteering for Crisis Open Christmas 2004, either for the dental service or as a general volunteer, then more details are available from the website www.crisis.org.uk