

Volunteer Reflection

Fun in the sun with Dentists? Our first volunteering experience.

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As we collected luggage at the Puerto Plata Airport, it could have been a normal warm break from a cold January in Toronto. The difference was the 3-4 kilos of toothbrushes, toothpaste, and other dental gear in our suitcases. Imagine what security would have said if it had been in our carry-on! Laurie's prehistoric suitcase was all the serious equipment, a veritable dental office in a bag. Everything short of a chair that the team would need for 5 days of volunteer teaching and dental work in a small local clinic.

Our journey began as a conversation with Laurie, a friend from high school, the previous summer. Her dental practice includes an annual education and clinical volunteer trip to somewhere in Central America and sometimes Africa. Her invitation was for us to help a bit with language and general chores around fetching equipment as well as cleaning and sterilizing. Some might call it a form of tourism, but they were long days and focused work. For me, an interesting look into new forms of service and supporting a very experienced and committed friend.

Laurie's merry band consisted of one dentist (herself), a paedodontist (child dental specialist), a dental assistant (a dentist from Peru but still qualifying in Canada), a dental hygienist that has previously done volunteer dental work, and my wife and I. Lots of available experience to cover for us; the two rookies. Her practice is generous but with a determined effort to reduce the carbon footprint in the dental industry. For this trip, she will demonstrate how to reduce the use of plastics in the packaging of tools and in the sterilization process. We were working with Fundacion Sonrisas who operate a number of clinics in the Dominican Republic that specialize in children's dental health.

Our location in this hillside neighbourhood of Puerto Plata has: two dentists, a business manager, two dental assistant/general functions and a young woman receptionist/educator/ animator. The Canadian team split between Laurie working in one room with the paedodontist and our hygienist working on her own. There is less familiarity with hygienists in this community, but it served well as both an example of the value of dental cleaning and triaging some of the patients. For us newbies, it took a couple of days to get into a groove; being helpful greeting and communicating with the patients as well as knowing the tools to hand to the dentist on request. Over the

course of the week, we became proficient with the Autoclave. The local team was not using it properly and once Laurie showed me how to use it, the knowledge transfer went smoothly. If I could use it, they certainly felt that they could operate their own equipment. This made a big difference in the speed of sterilization and allowed Laurie to demonstrate the reusable containers that held the tools in the machine.

This is a gentle way to bring up the dynamic of knowledge transfer and our volunteer effort. The foundation was very supportive and encouraging; their representative had a few conversations with us and their local staff, as well as separately with the local staff. The issue seemed to focus on ego and pocketbook. The incumbent dentists weren't really on board with any knowledge transfer, though over the course of the few days there were some guarded nods and smiles. This only occurred after it was made clear that the patients that Laurie's team worked on would not reduce the revenue stream to the clinic, or specifically to the two dentists. It was an understandable and clear concern that led me to ponder the framework of volunteering and knowledge transfer. There are many communities where providing the service is unequivocally helpful. Laurie spent part of her day off at a clinic for Haitian refugees that had no regular dentist, and no ability to pay. The kids were enthusiastic about learning good dental hygiene. The foundation clinic was a different story, we all experienced the challenge of communication and framing benefit. I respected Laurie's direct, get it done approach. It ruffled feathers at the beginning, but with the support of the Foundation representative, and her persistence, she won over some of the local dentists. For others, you could see a bit of aloof indifference. In a few days we would be gone, and life would get back to normal. Could we make even a small difference in their operations? Even proper use of the autoclave, learning some "kinder" extraction techniques, and saving a few plastic bags from the garbage would be a positive outcome.

The rest of the clinic's staff were warm and charming. They quickly discerned my addiction to coffee and there was always "una pequena taza de espresso" each morning shortly after we arrived. The clinic was busy, we worked each day from 8am to 4pm. Even if we wanted to explore the neighbourhood, the scrubs we were wearing, and the heat had encouraged us to sequester in the air conditioned haven of the clinic. Also, despite our best efforts to be independent, the office manager made sure there was a delicious lunch each day. We had a survey of local cuisine from soups to salads to meat stews. Delicious and much appreciated. For me it was a wonderful example of trying to take ego out of the situation and all of us learned something.

Did I acquire a better appreciation of dentists? It is an ancient art that no amount of technology and chemistry can make smooth and easy. My fear and aversion were tempered with firsthand knowledge and observation; but I'm still somewhat reticent. What was reenforced was the scary burden there must be for families with challenged children. For all of us the mouth is so important to eat, to talk, and to be

comfortably present in public. We can easily take this for granted. The kids with challenges found it scary and confusing. I admire the persistence of the families and the warmth and attention of Laurie's team. You could see her compassion to do right by the kids. This was both in how she handled them in the moment and her view to their long-term health. How do we make a difference? One person at a time. I gained a better appreciation for Laurie's focus and impatience. She insists on making a difference and pushes herself and her team in the time that is available. The respect for her from her team tells me it's working as much as the smiles on the children and families as they left her operatory.