

FOURTH-YEAR DMD TRAVEL CLINICS—ALUMNI PAY THEIR EXPERIENCES FORWARD

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Imagine hundreds of smiling children from remote parts of Latin America and elsewhere, their faces agleam, showing off their newly fixed teeth. Perhaps previously crying from pain or fear, they now tug on the scrubs of UBC Dentistry student volunteers, like those in fourth year of the Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) program, who gave them free care at a temporary clinic. “Muchas gracias,” the little ones say quietly. Some of the kids’ parents or relatives, who received free treatment themselves, respond by enveloping the students or supervising dentists with silent, heartfelt hugs.

“It’s important to use your skills, education and blessings to give back to underserved populations. It makes a difference.”

— Courtney Butler DMD 2013

Belize
Guatemala
Jamaica
Colombia

Since 2011, such images and memories have become motivational touchstones for fourth-year DMD students who participate in a 10-day travel elective. For the past four years, two UBC Dentistry students each year have joined students and dentists from the University of Southern California in a volunteer dental program run by Ayuda Inc.; this non-profit organization provides free dental care to underserved communities. The Sinclair Travel Fellowship Program, established by Vancouver-based Sinclair Dental, funds the UBC students’ transportation and expenses.

You’re questioning what it means to be happy, seeing how people can be so appreciative and giving when they have nothing. In North America, people have superficial complaints; I call these ‘First-world problems.’”

Milligan says she learned to do dental procedures faster, thanks to immediate feedback from the overseeing dentists in the triage atmosphere of the travel clinic. Now a dentist in Toronto, she is on the board of the Ontario Dental Association; at age 30, she believes she’s the youngest board member ever.

Now a dentist in North Vancouver, Butler says that she still uses many clinical tips and distraction techniques applied when treating children, which she gleaned from the Guatemala clinic where she worked alongside a pediatric dentist. Since she spoke little Spanish, Butler learned to communicate through a smile, using gestures and drawing pictures; such approaches have proven handy when dealing with immigrant patients in Canada.

Butler emphasizes that it is important to bring the same sense of selfless authenticity applied



In Cartagena, Colombia: Patients (A, B); Dr. Melissa Milligan with patients (C). In Patzicia, Guatemala: Dr. Melissa Milligan, a USC Ayuda team member and Dr. Courtney Butler (D); USC Ayuda team members with Drs. Melissa Milligan and Courtney Butler (E); Dr. Courtney Butler (F).

While these travel clinics reveal that dentistry is a valuable skill transferable to almost anywhere in the world, UBC student participants also learn that helping those less fortunate can bring satisfaction back home—on the job and in their own communities. With greater awareness of those in need both locally and globally, these students, now dentists themselves, feel motivated to do more volunteering and encourage other students and colleagues to do the same.

“These clinics are truly an amazing experience,” says Melissa Milligan (DMD 2012), a UBC Dentistry student who volunteered in April 2012 to be part of an Ayuda team in Cartagena, Colombia. In 35-degree-Celsius heat with 100-percent humidity, she helped treat 845 patients in a low-income barrio. “They change you fundamentally: how you view other people and what you’ve taken for granted.

She says she often draws on the greater confidence and resilience gained from her travel clinics when giving a presentation to older, more long-term dentists. She recognizes that, for many dentists, such rewarding volunteer work in a foreign culture is a rare experience. “Many dentists have been practising for 30 to 40 years, but I haven’t met many who have done these kinds of trips.”

Inspired by her participation in Colombia as a student, she decided to volunteer the following year, in April 2013, in the same UBC travel clinic program. But this time, she was an overseeing dentist and went to Patzicia, Guatemala. While there, she helped fourth-year UBC students Courtney Butler and Kaitlin Enns (both DMD 2013) and the rest of their group provide almost 1,000 treatments on more than 300 patients at a clinic set up in an elementary school.

at free clinics to one’s daily work in private practice and ongoing volunteering, whether in Canada or abroad. “You need to keep sincere compassion at the core of your approach,” she says. “It’s important to use your skills, education and blessings to give back to underserved populations. It makes a difference.”

During a travel clinic, student volunteers do not have the luxury of booking follow-up visits for their patients, so they learn that they have only one chance to make their actions count, says Enns. Therefore, they have to ensure that they are making truly sound decisions that will provide long-lasting comfort for a patient. Even now, at her current dental practice in Calgary, she can’t be sure that a patient will return, so she applies the same approach. “It’s a really good way to look at a problem: every interaction with a patient is crucial.”

Enns says that one memorable case of patient rapport and reassurance in Guatemala inspired her to apply the same soothing manner in her own practice. She watched an oral surgeon, speaking through a translator and using body language, talk to a woman about 50 years old, who had a growth on her lip the size of a baseball. The surgeon knew the team couldn't do a biopsy or other treatment at their temporary clinic, so he gently encouraged her to get it checked at a hospital. He was able to convey a sense of urgency without scaring her. "The patient seemed

had a resounding effect on audience member Michael Carabash, a dental lawyer who had been looking for a way to do more to give back. This year, inspired by the senior Milligan's presentation, he helped organize 1000 Smiles, a volunteer dentistry mission to Jamaica, with the help of Great Shape! Inc. Next summer, the father-and-daughter Milligan team plan to participate in one of the free clinics in Jamaica.

"The volunteer clinics create substantial changes in people," says Bill Brymer, a UBC Dentistry clinical assistant professor who advises, helps

this universal sense that wherever you go, people are people. They all have basic health needs and they all deserve the same level of care."

During a 2011 Ayuda travel clinic in Belize, UBC students Daniel Nosyk and Arash Maskan (both DMD 2011) learned how quick thinking, initiative and a willingness to adapt and improvise can make a difference in patient care. With dozens of children waiting in searing sun and little room left indoors to provide service, they grabbed water and instruments and used park benches in the shade as their "dental chairs"

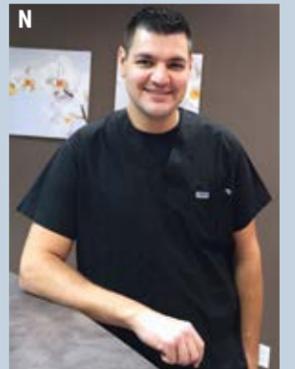
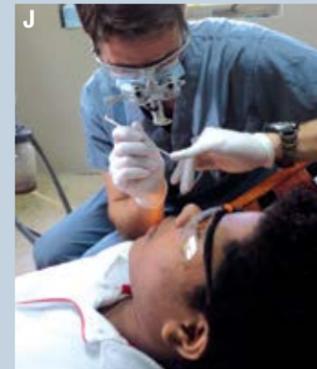
situation you're given, instead of losing your patience," he says.

While in Belize, Nosyk saw patients with no shoes who literally had only the shirt on their back; he left his running shoes there for one of them. Such experiences have helped him respond with empathy and understanding, rather than judgment, to current patients who are homeless or addicts. "You never really want to assume anything about the person and where they came from or where they are now."

has more time, she hopes to provide free dentistry in a Masai community in Africa. She has applied to be a volunteer clinical dentist with Operation Smile, a global charity that serves children with cleft palates and lips who need surgery. She would also like to provide free dentistry for the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. "It should be a priority for people who have the education and skills to broaden their horizons culturally and socially and enrich the lives of others," Butler says.



In Patzicia, Guatemala: Drs. Bill Brymer, Courtney Butler, Kaitlin Enns and Peter Brymer, Bill's brother (G); Dr. Melissa Milligan and her father Dr. Tim Milligan (H); Dr. Bill Brymer and patient (I).



In Fiji: Dr. Jamie Marshall (J). In Belize: Dr. Arash Maskan (K); Drs. Daniel Nosyk and Arash Maskan (L). In Edmonton, Alberta: Homeless Connect (M). In Toronto, Ontario: Dr. Arash Maskan (N); Yonge Street Mission's Evergreen Centre for Street Youth (O, P).

more relaxed and now had a plan," Enns says. "This was a good learning experience for me."

In true pay-it-forward fashion, Milligan invited her dentist dad, Tim, to accompany her on the volunteer clinic in Guatemala. She had no idea what immediate and lasting impact this action would have. "He had never been exposed to poverty like that," she says. "I remember a father coming up to him to thank him for fixing his children's teeth. My dad started crying. When the man hugged him, it was the most genuine hug I've ever seen."

The following year, when Milligan's dad accepted an award of distinction at the University of Toronto for his dental outreach work abroad, he called his experience in Guatemala "the highlight of his life," says his daughter. His words

organize and participates in the fourth-year elective abroad. "Dentists and students who volunteer at UBC seem happier, less self-centred and better able to cope with the stresses of [their] practice. For them, life seems less about 'my new Beamer' and other temporal pleasures and more about helping others."

Jamie Marshall (DMD 2015), who participated in a fourth-year dental clinic in Fiji this past April, says this experience has prompted him to contemplate every day how he contributes to the greater good of society. He splits his paid dentistry time between a regular dentistry practice and Kelowna's Gospel Mission, where he sees patients of all ages, including the working poor and those with addiction and mental health issues. After facing language barriers with patients in Fiji, he says he is now more sensitive to current patients' non-verbal cues. Of his clinical time in Fiji, he adds: "I got

to treat patients. They didn't let the crude outdoor conditions—a mechanic doing a brake job on a car only a few metres away—deter them. "If we didn't do that, the patients weren't going to be seen," Maskan says.

Now a dentist in Mississauga, Ontario, Maskan says that he brings this same "Don't worry—improvise" approach to his daily practice when equipment problems or other dilemmas arise. "I'm definitely a lot more flexible," he says with a laugh. He feels much more comfortable seeing child patients now, he adds, because he mostly treated youngsters in Belize.

In his current dental practice in Edmonton, Nosyk says that he often thinks of the impromptu park bench treatments in Belize, especially when a current patient can't lean back in a dental chair and he must find an alternate solution. "You work with the

Like all the UBC Dentistry graduates interviewed for this feature, Nosyk has made volunteer work a core passion, maintaining a desire to give back to his community. He attributes the Belize trip for inspiring his two current volunteer gigs. On weekends, Nosyk serves as a dentistry supervisor at a health clinic for underserved youth run by University of Alberta students in Edmonton. And twice a year, he provides free dentistry to Homeless Connect, an initiative that helps the city's at-risk and homeless residents.

Recently, Nosyk contacted Brymer, saying he'd like to be a volunteer dentist for one of UBC's future travel clinics. Butler and Marshall said that they, too, would love to share their skills this way. While Butler stays busy working with another dentist at Third Street Dental and helps care for two newborn nieces, she keeps a mental to-do list for volunteering. Once she

For almost three years after graduating from UBC, Maskan provided free dentistry once a month at the Yonge Street Mission's Evergreen Centre for Street Youth in downtown Toronto. The father of a three-year-old son says he is not travelling abroad for now, but hopes to help a friend who has done relief work in Cambodia. At work, Maskan keeps photos of the Belize trip on his desktop and shares stories of the trip with patients and rotating dental assistants. Like Nosyk, Enns and others, he urges dental students, colleagues and clinic staff to volunteer in a foreign country.

At the very least, start in your own community, Maskan advises, even if it's not in your field of expertise. "Life experience is what makes us in the end," he says. "The more life experience you have, the more you'll be attuned to everything around you."

Cambodia

Fiji