

Cambodian community dental nurses in need of equipment

Dentaid is currently seeking funding for twenty four basic sets of dental equipment, instruments and portable dental chairs for graduating dental nurses who will be working in rural areas of Cambodia.

Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in the world and it relies heavily on aid. Foreign donors have urged the government to clamp down on pervasive corruption which is preventing the country from moving forward. It is also burdened with the legacy of decades of conflict. The oral health record for Cambodia is poor, yet recently there have been some positive signs that this issue is starting to be addressed. However a serious lack of resources and funding is making turning the vision into reality very hard.

Cambodia has 450 dentists and 330 dental nurses for a population of 15 million. This means that resorting to 'traditional' or 'street dentists' is common practice. These can be anything from the village blacksmith to the local healer who work in unsanitary conditions with no proper equipment or sterilisation thus increasing the chances of serious cross infection of diseases such as HIV or hepatitis. Those who do train and qualify to be dentists all too often find work in private clinics in urban areas or become dentists overseas, being drawn by the promise of much higher pay and a better standard of living.

A dental council has recently been set up to address the problem of poor oral health care in the country but has as yet to make any real impact. The Cambodian national oral health plan states that there should be one dental nurse in each of the 956 health centres. The Dental Nurses training school was established in 1992 as part of the government's regional training centre for nurses to try to improve this number and improve the quality of care available to the poorer and more marginalised people in the country.

The dental nurse was introduced to meet the needs of the rural population of Cambodia in particular, who have little access to medical or dental services. The nurses provide basic medical and dental care to these people who would otherwise be unlikely to receive treatment. They can also identify conditions such as oral cancer and refer them on for further treatment. The Cambodian Ministry of Health

supports the continued training of dental nurses as they are considered a very appropriate and worthwhile asset for these rural areas where dentists are almost non – existent.

The nurses are trained to provide extractions, scaling, anaesthetic and simple ART. This is basic oral health care that can be administered without highly technical equipment outside of a traditional dental surgery. This is perfectly suited for taking into health centres in more rural communities who may not have electricity or running water. They are also encouraged to provide oral health education for children in community groups and produce their own education resources.

In the past the basic equipment that they need to carry out these basic but vital dental procedures was given out at graduation. Each dental nurse received a set of dental instruments and supplies. This enabled them to set up a dental clinic within a health centre and to provide basic dental services from here. However budgetary restrictions have meant that recently the graduates have not received the set of instruments and equipment that they require in order to carry out their work. Previously the training school received support from an NGO which has now ended.

Dentaid has recently created a low cost portable dental chair which is ideally suited to work in remote, rural, low income parts of the world. The creation of the portable chair falls into one of the four strategic priorities that Dentaid has for the future – the supply of physical resources. This remains a key priority for Dentaid and this particular project would signify an increase in our capacity to provide physical resources to remote and needy communities.

In order to carry out safe and effective dental treatment it is necessary to have an appropriate dental chair that is suited to the requirements of both the patient and the dentist. Carrying out dental treatment over a long period is difficult for dentists without a suitable chair to work with. They are liable to headaches, back and neck problems if they operate over benches and normal chairs. The comfort of the patient is also important for more involved dental work.

The chair has been designed specifically for community applications and functions. Dentaid has sought advice from several dentists who have aided in ensuring that

the design is most suited to the performance of the dentist and the comfort of the patient alike. The chair will be easily collapsible and easy to transport by car, boat or even plane. The Dentaaid chair would cost considerably less than other available versions which can reach over \$2,000. It is hoped that Dentaaid can supply these new chairs for £350.

Dentaaid has supplied portable instrument kits for several years to dental practitioners working in the field. These kits consist of basic instruments to be used to carry out extractions and dental treatments in the field where there is no electricity or running water. These have been used with huge success and made the range in which treatment can be administered much wider.

Dentaaid is shortly to introduce a new range of instrument kits to be used out in the field which can be purchased for long term use by oral health workers in the field. There will be information about these and further information about the portable chair in next months Despatch. The development of a low cost, portable and easy to use dental chair to use for community oral health programmes would support the existing work that Dentaaid is doing towards improving dental care in remote areas which previously did not have access to oral health care. The provision of these chairs would be an invaluable asset to extending this work.

There are an increasing numbers of dental nurses working to help improve the dental care of people who may never even have seen a dentist before and are addressing oral health problems which can greatly impact on individuals and communities. Dental nurses can have a very significant impact on the overall well being of the people within these communities.

Without support to purchase these sets of instruments and equipment and the portable chairs for the graduates of the training school the programme is in danger of collapsing. Nurses are reluctant to embark on a training programme if they will not be able to carry out the work once they have graduated.