

Dentaid extends its school oral health programme into Cameroon

Following on from the success of the pilot schools oral health programme in Uganda Dentaid is to replicate a similar scheme in primary schools in Cameroon.

The aim of the programme is to educate children in oral health care and provide dental screening and care, with the goal of combating poor oral health care in the schools and ultimately in the general population.

These pictures were taken at Government primary school, Ntam-Mbve , Kumbo, N.W province. This is a typical public primary school in Cameroon. Most of the public schools both in urban and rural areas look like this with dilapidated buildings and very poor facilities. The children are from extremely poor homes and many have a very long journey just to reach school. Their parents cannot afford the tuition fees which are charged in private and mission schools where the level of education and the facilities are usually marginally better.

Unsurprisingly dental care is not something that the families of these children can afford or prioritise and oral health is not generally regarded as of much consequence and importance. However the reality is that many of these children are suffering from very significant dental problems. These issues cause the children not to be able to sleep properly or function totally as normal. This naturally affects their overall general health and has a detrimental affect on their education.

These primary schools will benefit from the new Dentaid oral health education initiative. There are sadly many schools in this poor area which have needs which are just as great.

An initial pilot will be run for a year involving five primary schools. The programme will start in mid September 2008, the start of the new academic year. It is Dentaid's hope that after this initial trial is a success it will be possible to roll the scheme out into more needy schools in the area.

The project will initially involve about 2000 primary school pupils. The schools involved will be three Cameroon Baptist mission primary schools, a Catholic mission school and a government school. The primary schools have primary one to six. The average age of the pupils ranges from five to twelve.

There will be supervised daily tooth brushing, regular oral health education, basic dental care such as filling teeth using the ART technique and minor extractions. Oral health education lessons will be given to large groups of about 100 pupils. There will be regular screening for each child. Any child needing treatment will either receive attention in the portable clinic in the school or if they are in need of something more complicated they will be referred to the local treatment centre.

Dentaid will source as much as possible from within Cameroon and will supply what cannot be sourced from there. Unlike the Ugandan pilot it will not be necessary to provide a static surgery to cater for referrals as the nearby centres already have Dentaid clinics provided previously to the Cameroon Baptist Health Board.

Dentaid will be working closely with the Cameroon Baptist Convention health board (CBC) to implement this programme. The CBC is a missionary organisation providing health services in Cameroon, its dental service is the biggest dental health provider in the Cameroon. It has seven clinics spread across the country in urban and semi urban areas. There are four dentists, eight dental therapists and five dental assistants. They see roughly 2000 patients in these clinics each month.

Dentaid has a long established relationship with the CBC and Dr Leo Achembong in particular who will be overseeing the school programme. Dentaid provided seven surgeries to their clinics in 2007. Richard and David, Dentaid engineers, travelled out to install the equipment and train the dental technicians in how to keep it in good working order.

A majority of the patients who attend these clinics are from poor and underprivileged backgrounds who cannot afford high dental fees in private practices in Yaounde and Douala. Many of the patients have never seen a dentist before. These clinics are a convenient distance from the schools that will be involved in the programme and will serve as the referral centres for any children who need treatment that cannot be done on site.

This existing relationship with the CBC and the fact that it is a well respected and established presence in the area will help to ensure the success of this new venture. It will be run entirely by indigenous staff and will be fully self sustainable.

The initial school oral health pilot scheme in Uganda proved that given the presence of a suitable project manager it was possible to make the programme run efficiently using solely indigenous local workers. Dentaid planned to utilise local resources and labour, where possible, to provide employment and support for the local economy. A full time dental officer, Ambrose Matsiko and a dental nurse / health educator, David, were trained and appointed, both indigenous Ugandans trained in Kampala.

None of this would have been possible however if it were not for long term Dentaid supporters Chris and Polly Barton. Chris is a retired dentist and Polly a health educationalist. They were out in Kabale in South West Uganda for over six years with Church Mission Society. They established a thriving dental clinic at Kabale and helped to establish dental clinics at over a dozen church hospitals which Dentaid provided equipment for and have been very involved with training rural clinical officers to provide dental care. They set up and oversaw the development of the Ugandan schools programme for Dentaid.

Chris and Polly recently returned to the UK to live and it is hoped that the programme will continue to move forward as a legacy to all their hard work. The programme has certainly been a success with a significant reduction of poor oral health within the schools.

From the initial six schools involved in the programme the number soon increased to fifteen schools in the region. Nearly 10,000 children now receive free dental screening and all dental treatment necessary to improve their dental health. The dental screening and much of the treatment is carried out onsite at the schools. This is thanks to specialist portable equipment pioneered by Dentaid.

These screenings have also proved valuable in the early detection of oral cancer and other diseases such as noma. General health and hygiene is also limited and so the classes are a valuable opportunity to teach holistic health education. Additionally the charting of every child's teeth has made easier the measuring of the levels of teeth missing due to the practice of infant oral mutilation (an issue now being addressed in another Dentaïd project).

Oral health education is also a vital part of the programme. Each class is given an oral health lesson by a dental therapist and a dental nurse, featuring the culturally appropriate oral health posters provided by Dentaïd. Dentaïd hopes to be able to commit to support for this programme for the following year by continued sponsorship for the existing schools and will possibly extend the scheme into further schools in the area.

The huge success of the Dentaïd oral health programme has been very much reliant on the generous sponsorship of dental practices and individuals who take on the funding of a school for a year. Sponsorship includes free screening and dental treatment for the whole school, oral health education, provision of toothpaste and toothbrushes for each child in the school.

For the sponsorship the sponsor receives a letter from the head teacher of the school that is being supported, background information and photographs of the school. Photographs of the programme being implemented are sent at regular intervals. Sponsorship is also acknowledged on the Dentaïd website (www.dentaïd.org.)

Sponsorship of a school is £1000. If you are interested in supporting one of the primary schools in the Cameroon then please contact Nicky at Dentaïd on 01794 325146 or at nicky@dentaïd.org.