

Dentaid Despatch

Starting at the grass roots with oral health education materials and equipment kits

For many years, Dentaid has been involved in the development of culturally appropriate oral health education resources. Before this, oral health projects overseas often only had access to cast-off Western education resources. These featured white children or cartoon style vegetables brushing their teeth, which children from disadvantaged communities often did not understand. Dentaid's work in this area includes sharing ideas and concepts for education resources or directly supplying education resources to projects.

The provision of these materials is part of one of Dentaid's four main strategic priorities – oral health promotion. Dentaid supports and initiates programmes which enable people to increase control over and improve their own oral health. This may include educational and preventive programmes. Such programmes are planned efforts to build supportive public policies, create supportive environments, strengthen community action, develop personal skills or re-orientate health services in the pursuit of oral health goals.

The educational kits comprise of four large, colourful posters each teaching a different element of looking after your teeth. These include how to brush, when to brush, parts of the tooth and tooth shape and function. These are used by the teachers, in conjunction with a large tooth brushing model, to demonstrate the correct technique for brushing. This can be made quite fun as the children copy the teacher and have a go with the giant brush themselves. There are packs of toothbrushes available as part of the educational kit so that the children can have a go at brushing themselves and get used to the feel and technique.

There are also two nicely illustrated books to be used by the teachers, each answering the questions about brushing teeth: when do we brush? how do we brush? and why do we brush? The books are read aloud and there are discussion questions at the back to encourage conversation about tooth brushing with the pupils. These books and posters have been sourced from a Ugandan owned company based in Kampala. This provides innovative educational products for grassroots education and communication projects. The resources are made by creative young Ugandans who develop these culturally relevant tools and messages that resonate with grassroots educators, whether they are primary school teachers or community health workers.

The support of local enterprises is something that Dentaid is keen to encourage whenever possible. Many of the products are made from locally available resources such as grain sacks (as for the posters); flip flop material, bottle tops etc. so they are also ecologically sound. They are durable and easily replicable by educators in the field.

These oral health education resources are used in Dentaid's Schools Oral Health Programme based in the Kabale region of Uganda. This is an innovative holistic project in partnership with Rugarama Hospital which was initially piloted in six schools in 2006 and has now expanded to cover fifteen schools in the area, reaching 9,000 children.

The programme involves both in class oral health education, screening and on – site treatment of all children by indigenous oral health workers using portable equipment and referring more complicated cases to the Rugarama clinic. Once the children have been taught the fundamentals and importance of effective oral health care, using the education materials, they then take part in a supervised brushing programme using Dentaid supplied toothbrushes and toothpaste.

Basic oral health care lessons are a good opportunity for teachers to evaluate the children's oral health in the absence of a more comprehensive care programme such as the Dentaid schools programme. Teachers can counsel children who show signs of poor hygiene or are

having problems with teeth or gums to clean their teeth regularly or for more serious issues to visit a local clinic that offers dental care services.

In order for the teachers to be effective in passing dental care knowledge on to the children it is ideal if they themselves receive some training in oral health care. This is something that Dentaid encourages and actively promotes. Training is another of Dentaid's four major strategic priorities for improving oral health for disadvantaged communities around the world.

A key part of Dentaid's philosophy and strategy is strengthening the ability of indigenous individuals and organisations to improve the oral health of their own communities. By training oral health primary care workers the skills and knowledge needed will gradually pass down to teachers and parents in the community and improve the dental health of the next generations.

Despite improved training, access even to the most basic equipment remains a very real problem. In many countries children will still not even have access to toothbrushes or toothpaste and in these instances branches or chew sticks are the only available substitutes. Also all too frequently there is very little provision for care and treatment from an oral health specialist.

These are things which Dentaid is determined to remedy in the future and through the extension of projects such as health education lessons, schools programmes, the ongoing training of oral health care workers and the provision of surgeries and equipment eventually every child will have access to a tooth brush, tooth paste and regular dental care. By teaching children about oral health care early on and encouraging them to take action to keep their mouths healthy it will set a path for a gradual improvement of the general level of dental health of the people where there is currently little or no provision made for ensuring dental care.

Oral health education should ideally form part of a proactive holistic health care programme to run in schools and clinics in middle and low income parts of the World. Dentaid seeks to encourage class oral health education lessons with each school being donated culturally appropriate oral health education posters, books and tooth models and full treatment to make children dentally fit.

As can be seen from these ongoing projects and programmes Dentaid is involved at all levels of improving the standard of oral health care for disadvantaged communities throughout the world. Starting at the very grass roots of the problem and educating the children in dental care is an opportunity to encourage the important idea of prevention over cure.

This focus on oral health promotion must not detract however from the reality that there still remain many people who are in urgent need of dental assistance and that people with existing dental problems need to have somewhere to go for treatment. Many millions of people still do not get any kind of oral health education and the provision of dental equipment for new and existing dental clinics remains absolutely vital and an ongoing priority for Dentaid.