

Turning Education into Action

Lawrence Mudford

The premise of the *Mission: Impossible* films is to carry out a task where success is seen as so unlikely or improbable that it is deemed impossible. Is there a similar experience in dentistry? I recently had the opportunity to be a part of a dental team tasked with raising awareness of oral health issues and providing practical training, including how to examine the mouth and chart teeth, give local anaesthesia and understand the principles of extraction. Whilst this may not seem, on first reading, an impossible task, the challenge comes from the fact that each group of students comprises between 60-100 general nurses who are studying a Diploma in Tropical Nursing, or 100 doctors taking the Diploma in Tropical Medicine & Hygiene (DTM&H). These clinicians generally have no dental experience and are going to be working in developing countries for aid agencies, where their skills are going to be in the front line of healthcare and will have a direct impact on the community that they are living in. Oh, and the teaching needs to be completed in half a day of study, as well as ensuring that the 'mission' is carried out in a safe, risk-managed and appropriate way! Mission... impossible?

The mission...

- The ratio of dentists to population in most African countries is 1:150,000, compared to 1:2,000 in the UK.¹
- 68% of the global total of people with HIV and AIDS are found in sub-Saharan Africa.²
- From World Health Organisation figures, 84% of the world's smokers are in developing countries.³
- 90% of dental caries in low-income countries remains untreated and decay levels are increasing as the diet becomes more westernised.⁴

The above figures are alarming. And yet, when read in the comfortable surroundings of a practice or home, the picture they convey may be so far removed from the reality that we have come to expect living within the UK that their impact is diminished or diluted.

In the same way, perhaps this is how the world saw the plight of thousands of children in Ethiopia before the BBC news crew reported on the famine that was ravaging the country in 1984. The reporter, Michael Buerk, told the

story of a Red Cross field nurse, Claire Bertschinger, who was running two feeding centres that could only take in 60-70 new children at a time, whilst thousands more were in need of food, medical care and support. As the saying goes, the rest is history. You may remember the result of that filming, which led to world recognition of a problem that existed thousands of miles away, and resulted in the Band Aid Christmas single and the Live Aid concert in 1985.

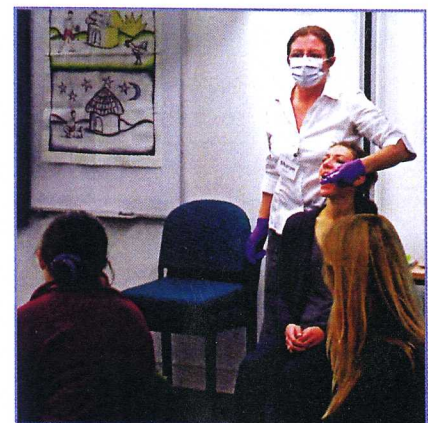
...should you choose to accept it

So what is the relevance of a story that is over 25 years old to the current statistics given at the start of this article? The answer is in the name of that same nurse, who since that news report, has continued to dedicate her life to providing healthcare training for developing countries as Director of the Diploma in Tropical Nursing, run at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM).

The charity Teeth Relief, under the direction of dentist Sharon Rankin, has been working with Claire, providing the oral health content of the diploma course, which runs twice a year, with 65 nurses studying for the diploma. They also work with Dr David Moore to teach 100 doctors on the DTM&H, which is a requirement to work for aid agencies in low-resource countries.

Training in relevant clinical skills for tropical and developing countries with low resources is provided, and oral care is recognised as an important part of this general healthcare. Using a specially developed teaching manual, the dental team give oral health advice and practical training, which includes how to examine the mouth and chart teeth, give local anaesthesia and develop awareness of the principles of extraction. This is the team that I had the privilege to join for its latest teaching module in January 2011.

So how do you approach a training situation where you are required to teach practical skills to non-dentists in the space of half a day that



Sharon Rankin demonstrating examination and charting procedure.

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