

## Presentation to the Dental Assistants Association

Jan 18, 2005

*The CIA Government Publication World Fact Book 2002 for Haiti. U.S. Haiti Embassy*

The focus of this evening's presentation is to present the needs of people thousands of miles away from Hamilton, in the country of Haiti. My commitment to these people is to share with you the experience of a nation greatly in need of our help and to try to make a difference.

Although Haiti is only a one hour's flight south of Miami (800 miles), it is not a country you will see in any Caribbean travel ads. Haiti is situated 50 miles east of Cuba, and shares the island of Espanola with the Dominican Republic.

They have a population of 8 million, and speak two official languages, French and Creole. It is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.

Haiti has no social assistance of any kind provided through its government. They rely almost solely on the generosity of private foreign aid from groups and individuals.

Statistically, the figures that impacted me the most were the following: 80% of the population lives in poverty. 70% are unemployed, the literacy rate is 45%, and the life expectancy is 49.2 years of age. 3 out of 5 Haitians suffer from malnutrition.

In June 2000, my Church listened to a presentation from Christian Child Care International about children needing sponsorship in various parts of the world. We decided as a family to sponsor a child, and I requested a girl from Haiti. We chose Venice, an 8 yr. old from Les Palmes, Haiti.

I wondered many times about Venice, her family, and her life. In the spring of 2001 an opportunity came to journey to Haiti, with Child Care. After much contemplation and discussion I decided to commit to go.

In preparation for my journey in the fall of 2001, I got the recommended inoculations and read books. I was very worried prior to my departure about the food, the water, the traveling conditions, and the accommodations. I worried about my health and all the serious diseases Haiti was plagued with, such as AIDS, Typhoid Fever, and Malaria. I also worried about what I would observe, and what I would experience. I was going to the poorest country on this side of the world.

Before my first journey, I made contact with a Canadian nun who has worked in Haiti for 30 years. I wanted to do more than observe life, I wanted to try to make a difference as well. At my request, Sister contacted two Haitian dentists, Dr. Charles Lafontant and Dr. Suzelle Toussaint, prior to my leaving and asked if there were any dental products I could bring down. They sent me a list of dental needs. I then contacted local dental offices, wrote letters and made brief presentations here and at the Burlington affiliate meetings. The result was 150 lbs. of donations through the generosity of many local offices and individuals.

Our first stop upon arrival to Haiti was the mountainous area of Les Palmes, where we had the privilege of meeting our sponsor child Venice.

After spending a few days in this rural community we then flew to Cap-Haitien in the north of Haiti, the country's second largest city. It was here I met Dr. Lafontant and Dr. Toussaint. They were so grateful that strangers from Canada could be so giving. I could not believe that these well educated professionals had so little materials to help their fellow Haitians.

2.

They had poorly maintained equipment, and few supplies to work with. I knew in my heart this was only the beginning, I needed to do more.

I expected a people tormented by decades of war, dictatorship and extreme poverty, to be hardened and angry. Instead those I met were quiet, respectful, and very patient. I also met volunteers from all over the world trying to make a difference.

I learned and observed many things during my first journey. In the medical world, I learned that hospitalized patients receive food only when their family brings it to them, as there is no hospital kitchen. Any medicine needed for the patient must be paid for by the family while in the hospital.

Although there is a great desire for education in Haiti, families must pay to have their children go to school, meaning that sometimes only one child per family may attend school at a time. There is therefore a large age variation within one class. Most children attend school due to the generosity of strangers from Canada and the US.

It is common to see students studying on the sides of the roads after school before nightfall forces reading by candlelight.

Finding water for cooking, washing and drinking is a daily struggle. Each day after school, children return home dressed in clean school uniforms only to change and reappear with buckets to walk to the closest water source, which could be two miles away.

Women carry their belongings miles to the nearest market long before the sun rises. They then sit in the hot Haitian sun waiting for buyers to buy their fruit, beans, clothes to name a few.

At this point I will focus on the dental world in Haiti:

*October 2002 The following information was provided by Dr. Suzelle Toussaint and Dr. Charles Lafontant.*

**Haiti** has 8 million people - 400 Dentist

**Education:** Degree

5 years dental school in Port au Prince

1 year field placement, automatically licensed

aprox. 20 graduate each year

A university education has no tuition fees for Haitians, however they must purchase all the books and dental supplies. I have a dear friend, Cherley, who is in fifth year of dentistry. They are responsible to obtain everything from gauze to handpieces. Cherley explained to me that at the University he would share his friend's handpiece during a timed clinical examination. When his friend finished he would then use it for his patient and this continued until I was able to provide him with his own handpiece. His most recent request is an amalgamator because there is only one on the clinic floor which is shared by all the dental students. He says he usually just mixes the amalgam by hand. At least he is gloved!

There are what the Haitian call "charlatans" who work as dentists in Haiti. My friend explained that sometimes people working as dental assistants in the city will then, with their very limited knowledge, decide to provide their own dental "care"! Although they are cheap, the Haitians seeking their care have no idea the instruments may not be properly sterilized, or that the transmission of disease is highly likely.

3.

Dental Specialists often come from Cuba and Australia for continuing education

Dentists volunteer their services from many countries.

Currently in Cap-Haitien there is a Cuban dentist on a four year work term sponsored jointly by the Haitian and Cuban governments.

**Cap-Haitien** area has about 400 thousand people (1 million?). There is 8-9 Dentists

Monthly income \$330. U.S.

Work hours - 8 hours i.e. 9:00am - 12 noon 2:00 - 6:00pm

Assistant - \$60 US. Per month

**Prevention** - People are aware that they need to brush.

Major reason for tooth decay - Sugar cane - "it is good for the body but an enemy for the teeth."

This is especially true in the rural areas.

I was watching a child chew on a piece of sugar cane. I was talking with a missionary. I smiled and said oh that is not good. He was surprised I said that. Even this educated man thought that it was ok to eat because it was similar to wood and the rough surface scraped the teeth. I then explained the negative side of sugar cane!



was to educate them so they could share their newly gained knowledge with their students. After the presentation, I asked some questions to see where their dental knowledge was at. It was not! I asked if they understood why deciduous, or baby teeth came out. They had no idea. I asked why teeth come out when we are older. After my explanation, this led to many interesting questions. It was a very worthwhile session, as hundreds of children will now benefit from these teachers experience.

After meeting with the teachers we then met with two groups of Mothers and their toddlers at a preventative center for pre natal and toddler care. We handed out tiny toothbrushes and did a hands-on demonstration with the Moms and few dads who were present.

Dental prevention care is something we teach on a daily basis in our profession. In Haiti however, there is no money, few trained dentists and minimal dental materials to help their citizens. Teeth pain in their future is a certainty. In Ontario for example, every child is entitled to dental prevention and care, while in Haiti, the availability of such is almost non-existent. Dental Prevention knowledge today for these people can only help - I hope!

Throughout the previous eight journeys we have taught over 4500 students at various schools. Each participant has received a toothbrush through the generosity of our local community. The main language spoken is Creole. I am fortunate to have an interpreter help me with the communication.

5.

I bring the oversized brush and teeth model – laughs are guaranteed in each class. As we enter each class the children welcome us and sit very quietly in their clean uniforms. Most classes are overcrowded and poorly supplied. Their beautiful faces, neatly prepared hair and tidy uniforms mask the reality of their existence. Then I recall the alleys we just walked through, avoiding the puddles and mud, and holding my breath to the stagnant smell of garbage laying on the sides of the pathways and roads. When I looked in their mouths I was shocked to see the rampant decay present at a very early age. In our talks we include not only brushing but healthy food, unhealthy food, and the risks of sharing their toothbrush.

With the older students we talk about the loss of teeth, diseases, digestion, and the value of a healthy smile when dating becomes an important aspect of their lives. This subject usually leads to many questions!

As a result of my appeal for donations through media attention and the local dental community, the overwhelming responses have motivated me to continue to realize that I am not alone in recognizing the needs of others so far away.

Since my initial visit, I have delivered over 1000 pounds of dental materials which have been personally delivered to seven clinics. I have also given needed supplies to Cherley, my dental student friend who now shares the dental treasures with his fellow University students. There are well educated dentists in Haiti. They are limited not by their knowledge by the lack of resources of supplies and income.

There is a dental clinic in the remote area of Les Palmes. Foreign funding ended in December 2003 which meant the area residents had to walk to the closest city 3 hours away on a very difficult mountainous dirt road. My focus last year was to reopen the doors of that dental clinic. Through the successful Healthy Smiles for Haiti Dance and Silent Auction held in May of last year. The doors did indeed open on June 14. In fact, we raised enough funds to pay the salaries for a qualified dentist and assistant! Dr Francky, the dentist in Les Palmes, is employed by Concert Action through the funds raised at the dance. Concert Action is an organization in Haiti who provides qualified personnel in the medical and agricultural fields. Transportation is provided for Francky from Port au Prince to Les Palmes. It is a 4 hour journey. He then works each day including Saturdays and Sundays for 25 days, until he returns to his family for one week. While in Les Palmes he lives in Dorm style accommodations with the other workers. The clinic is usually open from 9:00am to 2:00pm. Patients come and patiently wait in the hot sun to be cared for. Residents of the region will walk up to 2 hours on foot to go to the clinic. Pain is usually the motivating factor.

Francky also does preventive dental care teaching in the schools and at various villages surrounding Les Palmes.

A dentist is not as highly respected in Haiti as physicians are. Knowing the challenges dental students face during their University years in Port au Prince, and the difficulties they encounter to properly provide dental care I am

confident that every dentist in Haiti is working for the true love of their chosen profession. Dentists are often exposed to contagious diseases such as TB and AIDS. While some patients will share their medical history most of the time they are too ashamed, and nothing is said.

In October 2004 I had the privilege of assisting Dr Francky with our little sponsor child who needed a few restorations. My friend walks two hours to bring Venise to see me each time I visit. She is growing into a beautiful young lady.

6.

I founded **Healthy Smiles For Haiti** based on needs which I personally observed in Haiti, some of which I have shared with you tonight.

The **Vision** of Healthy Smiles for Haiti is threefold

1. Provide toothbrushes and teaching preventive dental care and nutrition
2. To supply equipment, instruments and sundries for the dental clinics in Haiti starting in Les Palmes and Cap-Haitien
3. To obtain funding to pay for treatment of patients who can not afford essential dental treatment.

This venture is very unique because I personally collect and distribute all the supplies directly to the dental clinics. The toothbrushes are handed personally to each student in addition to verbal instructions. The venture is unique because it seeks to provide financial support for qualified dentists in the rural areas of Haiti throughout the year and the supplies needed to provide safe care.

I ask you to remember the faces of those you have seen here this evening. Over the coming months when it is time to clean out the cupboards I hope you will remember these faces. When your dentist progresses to the latest and greatest in dental materials, I hope you will remember the conditions you have learned about and viewed tonight. Before you discard the instrument with a broken tip I hope you will remember their meager materials. If there is a new composite replacing ones now sitting in a box, as long as it is not expired, I know a place where it will be needed. Perhaps you could consider having a small 'For Haiti' box in the back room of your office where you could start collecting. Rotsaert lab and Horst lab will deliver the items to my dental office Clamain Dental in Burlington.

At the display table I have an information brochure to take to your dental practice, which outlines a list of needs, a web site, and contact information. Please have a look and then pass this information on to your employer. I think too often we as dental assistants think there is little we can do. You can have an affect in "Our" world of dentistry; remember what we in Hamilton can do. Share this with fellow employees and consider supporting a program that will affect smiles many miles from our city. For example, there are three more dental clinics waiting for upgraded equipment and the funding to pay the salaries of Haitian dentists, perhaps you and your office can help make this happen.

I ask you to keep Saturday April 30 in mind. That is the date for the next Healthy Smiles for Haiti Dance and Silent Auction. It will be held at Our Lady of Lourdes Church hall. The proceeds will be used to pay for the dentist's salary in Les Palmes and his assistant.

In closing, I must extend my sincere gratitude, not only to those individuals and offices who continue to donate, but dental suppliers as well. To my employers, Dr. Peter Clark and Dr. Vipani Maini, who allow me to use the back room for the donations that arrive for Healthy Smiles For Haiti. To all of my coworkers at Clamain Dental, friends and family for their loving support and encouragement. And Finally you - for your attention and continued support.

Anyone wishing to make a financial contribution, would like more information about my 9<sup>th</sup> trip on February 11, or more information in general I will be available to answer all of your questions immediately following this presentation.