

Happy Holidays

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Happy Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and whatever else you may celebrate. Now that the holidays are over, one can pause to think about the season and our feelings about others and ourselves. That time of year generally brings out the selflessness in us. There were presents for our families and loved ones, cards for friends and acquaintances, and merriment in our business and personal lives. We tend to be more charitable toward the needy. A few dollars at Salvation Army collection posts, a contribution to our place of worship, feeding the needy at a nearby shelter, or food donations to charitable organizations are all part of our spirit for the season. We feel worthy for what we do and what we give. This is a good thing.

The holiday season and these good feelings last for six to eight weeks each year, not counting the merchandising campaigns that start earlier and earlier. But what happens during the rest of the year to the needy people who receive the benefits of our munificence?

A similar feeling of self-actualization occurs within many of us as we provide dental services to the needy in foreign countries on missions with organizations who are committed to these laudable tasks. Many of our students spend their school vacations away from the United States providing care to developing nations' underserved populations under the supervision of our colleagues. It is a wonderful experience traveling to another culture and helping those who do not have the wherewithal to receive medical or dental care. Thousands of indigent children and adults benefit every year from these programs. Costs of travel and lodging generally are borne by the participants who not only pay their



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own way but also take time out of their practices to participate.

But what of people in our own communities who live in a state of health care not unlike that of our neighboring countries? What programs allow them to have the benefit of our ability to provide superb health care? Certainly many of these individuals are qualified for Denti-Cal or Healthy Families as their safety net providers. This population may elect to participate or not, or they may or may not have access to care in their neighborhoods. With those programs, at least there is some possibility for health care.

Unfortunately, there is a large group of people who are the working poor, or those who do not have sufficient resources to pursue dental care; not for lack of access or lack of desire but for lack of sufficient resources to budget this care.

California has several programs that could benefit this group of patients as well as allow our members to give back to their own communities. These programs do not require you to spend significant sums of money to travel to distant regions nor spend time away from your practice.

One of the easiest means to provide for those that need and cannot otherwise receive dental treatment is through a CDA-sponsored program called Donated Dental Services. This national program serves elderly, disabled, and medically compromised individuals who are unable

to afford their own dental treatment. It is simple and rewarding to participate. Make one telephone call to CDA and you can sign up to participate. The only requirement is to provide dental care to one or two patients a year in your office and with your treatment plan at no cost to the patient.

You control the patient flow and the treatment. It takes minimal effort; however, the returns are maximum to you (and the patients) in helping those less fortunate who have needs but a limited ability to receive care. Since the Donated Dental Services program began in California in 1995, 612 volunteer dentists have generously provided what is estimated to be \$2,660,724 worth of services for 1,204 disabled or elderly individuals. In addition, at the end of the 2006-2007 fiscal year, there was an increase in services rendered with 156 individuals receiving \$416,635 worth of donated dental treatment, which indicates the generosity of the volunteers and the often involved nature of the benefit provided.

Having participated in this program, it is easy to understand the pride one feels in doing something good for someone who has unmet needs. It has minimal cost and does not interrupt our daily routines. The individuals who receive the benefit of our expertise have a genuine need and are appreciative of what we do for them. According to the Academy of General Dentistry, American dentists have provided more than

\$116 million worth of free dental care to more than 77,000 individuals through this program.¹ If each of us in California annually treated two patients within this or similar programs, we could help more than 60,000 people in one year. Think about that, and then think about how good we can feel about ourselves this year when the holiday season is again upon us. ■■■■

REFERENCE

1. Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, Academy of General Dentistry, Oct. 15, 2007.

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