

A call to serve: Giving back to our communities

As we approach the holiday season, I thought it would be a good time to share my thoughts on providing charitable dental services. Following the pandemic, it certainly seems there are many more patients with acute dental needs¹. Some patients were reluctant to leave home for fear of contracting the virus. The economic impact of the pandemic negatively influenced the ability of many patients to afford routine dental care. We are well aware that dental diseases tend to be progressive and cumulative without intervention. Many patients end up seeking treatment at hospital emergency rooms, but these facilities are often not equipped to manage dental problems. It has been estimated that atraumatic dental pain is responsible for about 2% of all emergency department visits in the United States at a cost of over \$2 billion annually².

A number of local, national and international organisations have created a network of volunteer dental practitioners to provide care to the needy. The America's Dentists Care Foundation partners with state chapters of the American Dental Association to organise Mission of Mercy events every year that provide free dental treatment by volunteer dental practitioners. Dental Lifeline Network is a nonprofit humanitarian organisation and charitable affiliate of the American Dental Association. It provides access to comprehensive dental care to vulnerable people with disabilities, more senior patients and the medically compromised. The American Dental Association also publishes an International Dental Volunteer Guide that includes over 150 organisations offering volunteer opportunities around the world. The International Volunteer HQ and GoEco are also top-rated organisations for treatment abroad. Volunteering overseas gives dental practitioners the opportunity to give back to developing communities, while experiencing cross-cultural exchanges and gaining dental experience. It also provides an opportunity to educate dental practitioners in other countries so they can better serve their patients.

Dental implant treatment is more expensive but often offers the best solution for optimum dental

function and improving systemic health. Most dental implant companies, including Straumann, Envista (Nobel Biocare), BioHorizons and Dentsply Sirona, partner with and support a variety of organisations and initiatives at a local, national and international level to bring better health to communities all around the world. The Straumann Access to Implant Dentistry programme is the company's global initiative to help underprivileged patients who are in need of treatment. They collaborate with dental practitioners who provide treatment without charge, and they donate the relevant products. Contact your implant manufacturers' headquarters to explore options for providing charitable implant treatment.

Many dental implant organisations have established volunteer opportunities and initiatives around the world. The International Congress of Oral Implantology formed the Implant Dentistry Research & Education Foundation to provide research grants that indirectly may assist patients in obtaining dental implant services as part of advancing research. The American Academy of Implant Dentistry Foundation offers the "Smile, Veteran!" programme to assist military veterans and families in accessing and receiving dental implant services. The Academy of Osseointegration has a Charitable Grant Program that provides financial assistance to improve the quality of life for those who have been diagnosed with a lifetime dental deficit or suffered from severe dental trauma and who are unable to receive the dental therapy they need due to economic restraints. The Smiles for Everyone Foundation is a nonprofit organisation with the mission of delivering smiles by providing free dental care for those in need all around the world. They have launched a new programme called "Implanting Inspiration" which will provide free dental implants for low-income and underinsured patients. The American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons has a vast network of charitable organisations on its website and encourages its members to find volunteer opportunities.

I call on all dental practitioners reading this editorial to please consider donating your time and skills to give back to your community and volunteer to provide charitable care. Volunteering provides a sense of purpose, strengthens the connection with your community and offers a great opportunity to meet new colleagues. Helping people in profound need or who might not have access to dental care is part of the ethical fabric of our profession. As the Dalai Lama³ said, “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act.”



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References

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