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Dental diplomat brings relief to Afghanistan

An interview with Dr. James Rolfe, founder of the Afghanistan Dental Relief Project



Dr. James Rolfe from Santa Barbara, Calif., works as a dentist in Afghanistan.

By Robin Goodman, Group Editor

Dr. Rolfe, please tell our readers about what led you to become involved with dentistry in Afghanistan?

I watched the people of Afghanistan as they were continually abandoned by the world; first when the Soviets invaded, later when they were defeated, and still later when the Taliban were ousted. Virtually no aid was getting to the people.

In 2003, I was told that we needed to forget about Afghanistan and support invading Iraq, as a matter

of national security. I had to do something. In September 2003, I flew to Wardak Province in Central Afghanistan with portable equipment and worked in an orphanage at an elevation of 11,000 feet for three weeks.

I would treat an orphan, and he would become my assistant. Working through the 40 or so orphans, I found that about 85 percent had the ability to work in dentistry. Then I started seeing people from the surrounding cities. I saw many people

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TK

Crest Oral-B will recognize five deserving dental hygienists who go above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis. Nominated by their peers, these professionals truly make an impact on patients and the oral health cause.
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Another reason to stay in shape

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who were literally on the verge of death from their dental problems.

I learned that no dental care was available in the entire province. Thus, I decided to start a dental clinic to provide basic dental treatment, and a training program to train the orphans and widows to be dental technicians.

What did you do then?

I purchased a 40-foot steel, shipping container and spent 18 months modifying it into a modern, three-chair dental office that was completely self-contained with its own water and power. Then I shipped it, along with 120,000 pounds of other equipment and supplies, to Afghani-

stan on a cargo ship.

When it arrived in Pakistan, I flew to Kabul to look at the site for the clinic that was donated by an Afghan cabinet minister. I went to the land site, but I had been deceived; I found that it was not available.

For the next six weeks, I searched for another site, but in the end, I had to return the shipment to America or lose it to the minister, who was sponsoring the shipment. It took almost a year to locate another site. I shipped it again, and this time the shipment became hung up on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border for almost four months. When it was released, it was the dead of winter.

I had to work outside setting up the clinic during the coldest part of

the Afghan winter. The house on the property had no heat water, or electricity. My fingers were frostbitten and I lost about 15 pounds.

By the time I was finished in January, the cold winter had frozen all of the pipes in the clinic, and I had to leave everything and come back later. Returning in May, I hired an Afghan dentist and an assistant, and opened the clinic to the public.

How has this worked out?

Good. We operated the clinic with one dentist for about a year, then hired two more dentists and began training orphans and widows as dental technicians. In the first year of the school, we were able to train dental assistants, laboratory technicians and dental hygienists.

We recently opened three more operatories, and now the clinic is treating about 50 patients a day. Our commercial dental laboratory is now open as well, providing removable prosthetics for patients in our clinic.

Also, our guesthouse is now available to people who want to volunteer their services by teaching or providing treatment.

Most people would think that Afghanistan is a scary place to be right now. Is this true?

There is some element of risk there, but risk also exists in our own society. About 100 miles from where I live in the United States is the murder capital of America: Compton, Calif. I go there on a regular basis to pick up donated supplies from a dental supply company. There is an element of risk in every area.

Recently, an attempted car bombing occurred in New York City. I have never felt at risk in Afghanistan. We have never had a problem at our facility in Kabul. I have a motorcycle that I use daily, when I am there. The Afghan people are warm and friendly, and appreciate what I am doing there. They have nothing, but are very generous with what they have.

How would you characterize the life in Afghanistan today?

Life is very hard now in Afghanistan. The average life span is 42 years, due to the harsh conditions of life, lack of health care and a 70 percent level of malnutrition. Only 15 percent of the populace can read and write.

Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world, and 20 percent of children die before age five. So many adults have died that there are 3,000,000 orphans, with the average age of the population being 14 years.

Most children believe that life is not worth living. Ninety percent of Afghan citizens have no access to dental care, and most have never had a toothbrush. There is one dental X-ray machine in all of Afghanistan.

How can these conditions exist in our modern world?

When Afghanistan was attacked by the Soviet Union, anyone who could afford to leave the country did so with entire family. These privileged people were also the elite of the country: the intellectuals, people with technical knowledge, all the elements making up the infrastructure.

When they left, they took the heart out of Afghanistan. What was left were the poor people, with no means to survive or maintain their lives. This is the way it is there now. The Afghan people feel that the world has forgotten them. They need to know that people care.

How can people help?

Donations can be mailed to ADRP, P.O. Box 734, Santa Barbara, Calif.,

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Dr. Rolfe works in Afghanistan building the dental clinic he founded.

are being created to improve the technical infrastructure. Women are being empowered to be authority figures in the male-dominated society there. Patients accessing our facility enjoy better health.

Anyone may volunteer and donate through our organization to bring benefits to the people of Afghanistan, which might not occur otherwise. Combined benefits improve social stability. Everyone benefits. ■

Congratulations to Dr. Rolfe!

Since this interview was conducted, Dr. Rolfe has been selected as an honoree for the 2010 National Awards for Citizen Diplomacy and will fly to Washington, D.C. in November to receive the award. Rolfe has also done interviews with NPR and People magazine. In addition, the LA Times published an article about Rolfe, which can be accessed at www.latimes.com/health/la-me-afghan-dentist-20100908,0,164334.story.

93102. Those who want to become supporting members can access our website at www.adrpinc.org and pledge a monthly donation. We are a 501C3 non-profit charitable organization.

We are always loading a shipping container, so equipment donations and supplies are welcome; just call our headquarters at (805) 963-2329, or send an e-mail to adrp@verizon.net.

Volunteers who want to treat or teach at the Kabul Project Site should request information. All volunteers pay their own travel expenses, and \$15 a day board and room to stay in our modern guesthouse. The residential facility offers meals, laundry, Internet, hot showers, and 24-hour security.

Is there anything else that people should know?

As the richest nation in the world, we have an obligation to help the poorest. We owe the Afghan people a debt of gratitude for dying to defeat the Soviet Union and for elevating the United States into the status of super-power of the world. We are overdue in paying this debt. All of our officers are volunteers.

Our organization has no overhead, so that means that 100 percent of each donation goes directly into the project. We are actually saving lives in Afghanistan. Orphans with no options are being educated so that they can have a normal life. Widows are being trained so that they can feed their children.

For the first time, Afghan dentists can access professionally trained dental assistants, laboratory technicians and hygienists. Vital elements

More information

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