



International Medical Relief

VOLUNTEERING OVERSEAS WITH INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL RELIEF: A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE BACK

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International Medical Relief (IMR) works with Ministries of Health in more than 50 countries around the world to provide medical and dental relief to communities that are lacking access to basic health and dental care. Short-term trips (7-10 days) give dental professionals, students, and nonmedical volunteers the opportunity to work directly with patients and make a positive impact on their health and on their lives.

We send volunteers on approximately 30 trips per year to communities in Africa, Asia, South and Central America, and Eastern Europe, offering a wide variety of locations in which volunteers can choose to serve. To give volunteers plenty of time to plan ahead, we schedule trips about a year in advance and post the information on our website. We rotate through the communities we visit, so a trip to Haiti that might not be possible for a volunteer this year may be doable the next.

HISTORY OF DENTAL CARE THROUGH IMR

I grew up in my father's dental office. Once I got older, I spent my summers assisting chairside in the sterilization area. As a result, we well appreciate the value of a great dental clinic on our trips and strive to communicate the importance of good oral hygiene and dental care to our patients.

From the beginning, my goal for IMR was to provide three components in every clinic – medical, dental, and prevention/education. The dental care we provide focuses primarily on two key objectives: short-term and long-term dental health.

The first objective involves meeting the greatest needs of our patients – relieving oral pain and infection from untreated dental caries. We perform examinations, consultations, and extractions; we treat abscesses; and we refer patients with suspected oral cancers to local medical providers.

Second, and equally important, involves the long-term sustainability of good oral health and hygiene practices. We do this by providing sealants, cleanings, fluoride treatments, and oral hygiene instruction.

Our goal is far greater than simply to treat acute dental needs today; it is to save teeth in the future by providing oral hygiene education and toothbrushes to our patients, along with helping to educate local dental students whenever possible.

Sustainability is a key component of our dental care, and conducting community outreach to define the breakdown in dental health is important. We strive for our dental volunteers to educate patients on the root cause of disease in caries, including poor nutrition, access to refined sugars, hydrating with sugary soda drinks, lack of fluoride, and poor hygiene habits. Some rural communities we visit use soda drinks as a means of hydration or sugar treats to pacify children. These lead to early tooth decay that often becomes unrecoverable.





WORKING INTERNATIONALLY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

For the most part, our patients have never seen a dentist. We often see patients at our clinics with dental care as their primary concern. Caries have pitted out their teeth and they need extractions.

We have also seen some fairly serious cases over the years where impacted teeth have affected a patient's overall health and well-being. Once we saw a small boy in Kenya whose lower teeth were growing down rather than up causing them to break the skin underneath his chin.

Every case is different, but when the oral health is so severely compromised, often the only way to improve overall health is through removing the caries causing infection by removing the teeth.

Our dental volunteers typically provide six days of treatment at each clinic. Dentists see an average of 20-40 patients per day depending on the severity of the cases, the length of time needed with each patient, and the number of extractions per patient. If we have the opportunity to work in conjunction with a local dental school, we may be able to easily treat several hundred patients in just a few days.

We always seek out local international dentists on our trips. They travel with us to the remote villages and assist with our clinics, working alongside our dentists. Often there is mutual learning and sharing involved. Our dentists learn the local techniques for teeth brushing and tongue cleaning while they demonstrate advanced techniques to the local dentists.

Because IMR clinics return to the same villages year after year, our goal is to provide enough education about home care that we work ourselves out of a job in every community we work in. We have successfully been able to move out of certain villages and into new ones.

VOLUNTEERING WITH IMR

Volunteering on a trip with IMR can be a life-changing experience. Some dentists go with us right before they retire as a bucket-list accomplishment; others have gone on many trips with us. We have some volunteers that make an IMR trip an annual event and bring their office staff or family along for the experience – everyone who goes on an IMR trip has a valuable role to play whether he or she is a medical or dental professional or not. Nonmedical volunteers are crucial to our clinic operations.

To volunteer as a dentist, one must have an active license. We also require malpractice insurance, and we have resources that can help with easily obtaining a short-term policy. Many retired dentists have volunteered with us by working with patients with their oral health and hygiene, providing fluoride treatments, and helping practicing dentists, and an active license is not required. We have no requirements for maximum or minimum number of dental volunteers per trip – even one dentist or hygienist on a trip can make a big difference in the lives of our patients.

In addition to providing the overall trip cost, which varies depending on the destination, volunteers need a passport (sometimes a visa), vaccinations based on the destination, and money for souvenirs. Dentists can bring their own instruments or rent a kit from us at a nominal fee that offsets the cost of the instruments.

For student volunteers, learning from a preceptor in the field and getting hands-on patient care and interaction is invaluable. These experiences set them apart on their resumes. They also receive beneficial letters of recommendation from their mentors. Often, our student volunteers stay in touch for years with their dental mentors.

Volunteers work hard in clinic, but each of our trips includes some kind of vacation component that the volunteers look forward to. Depending on the location, we will typically take a day or two to go on a safari, visit a beach resort, or experience a country's history and culture. During some trips, our housing is in a resort hotel so every evening after clinic is like a mini-vacation on its own. Even in the most rustic of locations, we find many ways for our volunteers to relax and have fun. Oftentimes, our volunteers will take the opportunity to extend their stay after clinic is over for an unforgettable international vacation.

For dental professionals who can't go on a trip but would still like to support our mission, there are many ways to help out. For example, donations of dental supplies are incredibly valuable to us. Dental offices may also choose to sponsor a student who is fundraising to go on a trip, making his or her efforts just a bit easier. Or you may sponsor oral health and hygiene education for an entire village to help improve the community's overall health.



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For more information on IMR and upcoming trips, visit

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