

For Jerusalem's poorest, a dental clinic offering free care

By Tamar Morad

On a recent morning, three daughters from the Jibrin family of East Jerusalem came armed with their toothbrushes for their checkups at Dental Volunteers for Israel in Jerusalem's Talpiot neighborhood. The clinic requests that children bring their toothbrushes to each visit, so dentists can advise them how to improve their technique and prompt them if it's time to buy a new brush.

The Jibrin family was in relatively good shape: after all, each girl's toothbrush looked fairly new. Around the same time, a Haredi family with 13 children brought in three toothbrushes, the bristles worn down to the plastic; the parents explained that all 15 of them shared the three brushes.

According to Michelle Levine, director of international relations and development for the organization, also known as DVI, that story isn't unusual. In fact, she says, "many children who come through our doors have never seen a toothbrush before."

Although Kupat Holim, the national health network, began offering near-free dental care to all children through the age of 8 since July, business continues to boom at DVI, a 30-year-old free pediatric dental clinic staffed mostly by foreign dentists on temporary visas that offers free dental care to children between the ages of five and 18.

"The need here is great, and it's only growing," says DVI general director Dr. Roy Petel, who is also secretary general of the Israeli Society of Dentistry for Children and instructor in pediatric dentistry at the Hadassah School of Dental Medicine at Hebrew University.

He says that for many of the tens of thousands of impoverished children in Jerusalem, where one-third of all families live below the poverty line, Kupat Holim's co-pays - which start at NIS 20 - are a deterrent. Dental Volunteers Israel

charges no co-pay for any type of care, and while the organization has not expanded the number of dentists and available chairs, its patient list has grown from 1,200 children per month in 2009 to some 1,600 monthly visits this year.

Children are eligible for care at DVI if they are referred through the city's social welfare department or by a number of shelters for women and youth. Arabs, Haredim and Ethiopians comprise the bulk of patients. Trudi Birger, the late founder, was a Holocaust survivor who was not a dentist but who, as a child in the camps, swore that if she survived the war she would do something meaningful to help alleviate the suffering of children. When the government cut dental programs from the national health basket in 1980, she found her cause. DVI has since become the largest and longest-running free dental clinic in Israel, treating tens of thousands of children. In 2009, it received the prestigious President's Award for Volunteerism.

The effect of poverty

The Health Ministry's dental division, which oversees licensing, grants temporary licenses for up to one month for foreign dentists wishing to volunteer at DVI. Some 5,000 foreign dentists of all religions from the U.S., Europe and Latin America, in addition to some local dentists, have volunteered since the organization started.

Corporate and individual donors donate supplies and equipment. Henry Schein, a Fortune 500 manufacturer of dental supplies from the U.S., provides most of DVI's supplies with an annual shipment. Oral health education is also part-and-parcel of the care: Any child who enters the clinic-usually because they are in pain and require fillings or root canals-is required to come back twice annually to attend classes as a prerequisite to checkups.



A dentist at the Jerusalem clinic working on one of his patients this week. *Tamar Appelbaum*

pain affects their ability to concentrate, says Dr. Wolfson. "The attendance and performance of these children in school is directly related to their success in escaping the cycle of poverty."

Dr. Scott Dubowsky, a board member of the American Friends of DVI and dentist from New Jersey, volunteers every year. His "path" to DVI, he says, began with the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. He watched the Twin Towers fall from his office window, and felt devastated and compelled to help the victims and their families. For the next eight months, he volunteered for the dental identification unit of the New York City Medical Examiner where he helped to identify victims' remains. It was "a very difficult experience" but it showed him that "as a dentist, there were ways to use my professional skills outside the conventional setting."

A dentist friend volunteering at DVI suggested Dubowsky also put in some time. "I took him up on it and I've been hooked ever since," he says. "After my first visit to the clinic I realized that my love for Israel, my Jewish identity and my lifelong career could all come together to help the children of Jerusalem. It was a perfect fit."

For the last eight years, dentist Dr. Ofice Helmer and his wife Brenda, from Fort Worth, Texas, have volunteered for two weeks in late December and make a point of working on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. "As Bible-believing Christians, my wife and I have a heart for the people and nation of Israel," says Dr. Helmer, who was awarded this year the American Dental Association's prize for volunteer service in a foreign country following his nomination by DVI.

Devorah Kuzceki, 26, is a single working mother from Jerusalem with two young boys, Aaron, 8, and Yotam, 5, and the daughter of

fact that so many children arrive with teeth so rotten that the easiest solution would be to extract them.

"The dental consequence" of poor diets associated with poverty in Israel, says Dr. Wolfson, "is quite simply at a level unseen in other Western societies." Dental disease can also be associated with delayed growth and behavior and attention problems in children.

In addition, several dentists interviewed for this article at DVI and in private practice say levels of fluoride in drinking water are too low in Jerusalem, and that they see the consequences in their patients. A study of fluoride tests released earlier this month by the Health Ministry found that 67 percent of localities throughout the country, including Jerusalem, provided insufficient levels to prevent tooth decay.

Moreover, children below the poverty line "desperately need dental care to do well in school" because

In addition, says Dr. Petel, "When a child comes in, we make sure that all of his or her siblings begin coming to us, too, because we know that if one child in a family has a dental problem, the others are on their way to having one, if they don't already."

Once in the door, dentists sit with parents and children to cull out underlying problems. "So many families who come to us admit to feeding their kids sugary junk for breakfast, lunch and dinner," says Levine. "But when they start to come here, most of them start to make the necessary changes-and we begin to see the difference in the children's teeth."

Volunteer dentists attest that the clinic upholds a high quality of care. "The emphasis is on restoration of all teeth and I am always amazed at the extent to which an attempt is made to save all teeth" with root canals and other complex procedures, says volunteer London dentist Dr. Robbie Wolfson. That's despite the

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American immigrants. When Aaron started complaining of pain in his teeth several years ago, she knew

he had to see a dentist, but she couldn't afford the cost of care. A social worker referred her to DVI. Dentists there found and filled six cavities in Aaron's teeth and installed a crown.

"It's hard to keep your head above water in Israel finan-

cially and this place has been a real savior for my kids," says Ms. Kuzecki. "The dentists here don't let any child fall through the cracks. If you haven't made a date for your regular checkup, they call and track you down and make sure you'll be there."