

Inside Israel

Robbie Wolfson shares his experience of time spent providing dental care for needy children at the Dental Volunteers for Israel clinic

While Israel appears to be a prosperous and successful nation within the Middle East, it nevertheless has huge areas of deprivation. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jerusalem where, out of a total population of 800,000, 25% (or 200,000) are children living below the poverty line. That is a quarter of the population.

As a result, their diet is poor and full of carbohydrates, especially sugar and sugar-rich drinks. The dental consequence is quite simply at a level unseen in other 'western' societies.

When Trudi Birger – a holocaust survivor – arrived in Israel, she felt compelled to help underprivileged children. She realised the extent of the dental problem in Jerusalem, so undertook to set up the Dental Volunteers for Israel (DVI) clinic, now in its 30th year, and named after her.

Thanks to benevolent support from visiting volunteer dentists from around the world, DVI is able to provide free dental care

and oral health education to thousands of needy children in Jerusalem every year, regardless of race and religion, be they Jewish or Arab.

In June 2009, Israel's President Shimon Peres presented the President's Award for Volunteerism to DVI. This is the highest award an Israeli non-profit organisation can hope to achieve.

There is a significant number of needy children in Jerusalem, and dental care is often more of a necessity for them than it is for other children; their dental problems are typically far more severe than children in better economic situations. DVI provides critical basic services to the poverty-stricken communities of Jerusalem. Volunteer dentists from around the world, together with their Israeli colleagues, perform between 1,000 and 1,200 treatments each month.

Cost-efficient

In 2009, 141 volunteer dentists

from around the world performed 13,411 treatments, helping thousands of needy Jerusalem children stay in school. But it's not just about quantity – DVI works hard to maintain high standards of care, in the belief that every needy child should receive the same level of care he or she would get if their family could afford treatment.

A faculty member from Hebrew University's paediatric department is always supervising in the clinic, and a Hebrew University paediatric resident regularly rotates through. During the past 29 years, more than 4,500 dentists have volunteered at DVI. That's part of the reason DVI is the most cost-efficient free dental clinic in Israel; the dentists are all volunteers and, in addition, the supplies, materials and even some of the equipment is donated by major manufacturers and distributors like Henry Schein and Premier.

And so the clinic's total operating budget remains a fraction of what it would cost to operate a clinic this size anywhere in Israel (DVI has five dental chairs, a 6th dedicated X-ray chair, plus a 7th dedicated to a full-time hygienist). Most volunteers are general dentists and paedodontists, but there is a need for help from other specialists – in particular, endodontists.

I have just returned from my second visit as a volunteer and can report that the clinic is



Above: Robbie Wolfson in the clinic, and some of the young patients in the waiting room



Robbie was formerly the owner of the Ladybarn dental in South Manchester which he sold in 2007. He now works part time at Parsons and Finnegan, part of the James Hull and Associates group, which is a practice in Timperley near Altrincham, Cheshire.

Time away from dentistry is spent at the bridge table, cycling, playing the piano and the voluntary work at the dental clinic in Jerusalem, providing free dental care to Arab and Jewish children from underprivileged homes.



Robbie outside the clinic named after its founder, a Holocaust survivor who felt compelled to help the underprivileged children in Israel

extremely well-equipped and the staff, dedicated and knowledgeable.

The dental nurses are wonderful with the children and make it a pleasant experience for both the kids and dentists. 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.

Pulpotomy on deciduous teeth is the norm as are root canal procedures on permanent first molars in eight year olds! Add to this, the use of LA as

routine in all children (5-18 year olds) and use of rubber dam whenever possible.

Amalgam is still the material of choice because it lasts, is cheap and no one has satisfactorily shown that it is unsafe to use. As the clinic is supervised by a specialist paediatric dentist, along with Professor Edelman, who has the chair in paediatric dentistry at Hadassah University in Jerusalem, I was certainly in no position to argue the point. Using amalgam was, for me, in some ways 'back to the old days' but, logically, there is a great deal of sense in what they are doing as we know that amalgam lasts and doesn't give rise to the problems that glass ionomer and composite have.

I was most impressed with the dedicated prevention area. This separate building houses a waiting area with a table for the children to draw and create impressions of their dental experiences along with an audio-visual setup running DVDs on oral health and prevention themes. These were avidly and keenly watched by the children. A dedicated member of staff ran the OH programme and provided every child with a toothbrush (some families had to share one toothbrush) and all children saw the hygienist. It was a pre-condition

of restorative procedures that all children had to have completed the OH programme, to have seen the hygienist and to have shown an improvement in their OH and at least a basic understanding of correct diet. They were recalled for regular OH review.

Part of the community

I was keen to spend time in Israel and, as I now have the time to spend a couple of weeks, this was a great way to also get to see some of the country. I stayed in an apartment in the Rechavia neighbourhood of Jerusalem, just down the street from the President's residence and the Prime Minister's residence. The apartment was provided (free) by DVI and is centrally located. It has one bedroom, a living room, kitchen, bathroom and WC. DVI has several apartments available for its dentists and families to use, often with a sofa bed in the living room.

Jerusalem is a walking city and, from my apartment, I walked almost everywhere. It's just a pleasant 20 minute stroll to work (downhill – a bit longer

coming back). Working in the clinic and living in a regular apartment in an Israeli neighbourhood was a special experience; I got to feel like part of the community, and not just a tourist.

While I was at the clinic recently I met a young Palestinian dentist from East Jerusalem. His story was quite remarkable. As a child, he was treated at the DVI clinic. At an early age, because he was so impressed with his dental experience, he decided that he would like to become a dentist. His parents could not afford his education, but his extended family offered what financial help they could and he became a dentist. Now, although he works in a practice in East Jerusalem, he still comes back to visit the DVI clinic and even volunteers when the clinic has a last minute chair available.

I found the time spent at the DVI clinic extremely satisfying; I was able to give something back in the knowledge that these children would be benefitting from my endeavours.

If you are interested in volunteering (the working week is Sunday to Thursday and from 8am until 1.30pm) then please contact me at wolfsondental@gmail.com. Alternatively, you can visit the DVI website at www.dental-dvi.org.il.