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A lofty objective

Simple dental procedures and basic oral health initiatives can change people's lives

Jamaica—the land of Bob Marley, Usain Bolt, Rastafarianism, rum and reggae—has a Canadian connection that goes beyond the 400,000 or so tourists that flee our snowy winters every year to enjoy the Caribbean nation's tropical beaches. In the late 1990s, Toronto endodontist Dr. Gary Glassman was one of these thousands of Canadians enjoying a Jamaica holiday. But the swimming, sailing and snorkeling didn't distract him from noticing the "dire need for oral health care" among the impoverished populace. Like many other developing nations, the people of Jamaica have a very low dentist-to-patient ratio; there is only one dentist per 19,000 people and "the majority of Jamaicans probably never see a dentist," Glassman says.

The trip was pivotal; Glassman connected with the dean of the College of Oral Health Sciences, University of Technology (UTech) in Jamaica's capital of Kingston and organized a lecture for local dentists. This launched what would become a permanent initiative to enhance dental training in Jamaica, helping with curriculum development at UTech as well as bringing in donated dental equipment from Canada. Glassman launched another undertaking: setting up free dental clinics for Jamaicans. The initiatives eventually formalized under the umbrella of Glassman's charity, called the Goodwill Oral Health Project.

Glassman, who works pro bono as an adjunct professor of dentistry and endodontic programming at UTech, says that the Goodwill, through its clinics and education outreach, has reached "hundreds of thousands of Jamaican people." (Its success has inspired Glassman to plan missions into Africa, where there is only about one dentist per 150,000 people.) His outreach extends into Eastern Europe as well, embracing the training of dentists in Romania and the Czech Republic's capital of Prague—countries that are both experiencing an uptick in dental tourism. For 2018, he is planning to undertake continuing education for dentists in Israel. Glassman also lectures globally on endodontics. His messaging focuses around the latest technological

advancements in dental procedures as well as cutting-edge methods to eliminate pain, helping ameliorate the irrational fear some people still have for the dentist's chair. One helpful device, Glassman notes, is B-CALM, which "uses soothing sounds" through audiosensation technology to distract patients from the noise of the equipment.

Improving dental health is a lofty objective and one that even dentists from wealthy Western nations have a responsibility to uphold, says Glassman pointing, as an example, to a growing "crisis" in the United States. America's current health care insurance woes extend to dentistry: 130 million people currently lack the financial ability to maintain their oral health, with the result that nearly one in five Americans over the age of 65 do not have a single real tooth left. As a result of such neglect, Glassman says, oral cancer is on the rise in the US and, tragically, 90% of these cases are preventable through routine dental checks and educating patients about lifestyle changes.

The lion's share of Glassman's international oral health initiatives, however, is still focused on Jamaica, where he returns every few months with colleague Dr. Len Boksman, an adjunct clinical professor at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry in London, Ontario. The pair organizes regular "Health Fairs" involving two-dozen UTech dental students, who help treat hundreds of people for free. "Many of the patients are children who have never been to a dentist," Glassman notes. Routine cleanings and check-ups are undertaken, although some cases are of an emergency nature.

Glassman recalls one memorable case where—thanks to a few simple procedures—a nine-year-old girl had a new lease on life. The youngster, whose cuspids had grown to resemble pointy

fangs, was enduring the distressing moniker of "Dracula" from classmates. An examination revealed several problems. Numerous baby teeth, which weren't even loose yet, were rotting, causing constant pain. Glassman told the girl that he was going to "plant a fresh new smile to grow on her face." Thrilled at the prospect of a pain-free future, she didn't flinch when administered an injection of freezing. After extracting the teeth and filing down the pointy cuspids, the young patient

Dr. Gary Glassman instructing on essential dental care and education in Jamaica



"couldn't stop smiling," says Glassman. "That made her mom cry. They both kept thanking me and hugging me. For that little girl, her whole life was changed for the better."

This is only one example of the dramatic physical and mental health improvements that simple dental procedures and basic oral health initiatives can make in the lives of people who otherwise would face a life of suffering and disfigurement. "What stands out is how appreciative they are for the services," says Glassman. "They are so sincere in their gratitude. At times, I have been brought to tears when a patient hugs me and tells me how I have saved them from the pain and misery they are in from their teeth. It's very humbling and really makes the whole mission worth it." ●