

# The Importance of Oral Health and the Generosity of “Dr. G”

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by Emma Lewis



Are you afraid of the dentist? As a child, I remember an overwhelming fear. I had bad teeth (I think we ate too many sweets growing up in the UK) so there were regular visits. One sunny summer's day, I tried to escape from the dentist's chair. As he turned away for a second, I jumped up and made a frantic dash down the hallway towards the pretty flower garden outside. I didn't get far. My mother and the dental assistant joined forces, caught me and hauled me back, protesting, to the dental surgery.

Those bad old days are gone. There is simply no need to be afraid any more, people. Honestly. But Dr. Gary Glassman of Toronto, Canada understands the fear. One's mouth is "*a highly charged area,*" he told me as we sat down together in the University of

Technology's (UTech) dental school. *"It's the **center of our being**... But techniques and technology have changed."* It's true. Even my husband (who used to turn to quivering jelly at the dentist) now bravely goes along without me to support him. He still sounds surprised at his own admission: *"It didn't hurt! It was fine!"*

Now, Dr. Glassman is a special kind of dentist. He is the founder of the Goodwill Health Project, which teaches and supports dental studies in developing countries. Last month he and his colleague, Dr. Leendert (Len) Boksman were in Jamaica. From 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., for three solid days Dr. Glassman, who is Adjunct Professor of Dentistry at UTech, lectured in endodontics to second, third and fourth year students at the College of Oral Health Sciences, next to the Bustamante Children's Hospital in Kingston. The students treated hundreds of patients during this period, supervised by the two Canadians and UTech lecturers.



Dr. Gary Glassman is Adjunct Professor of Dentistry and Director of Endodontic Programming at UTech and a staff member of the Faculty of Dentistry at the graduate department of Endodontics at the University of Toronto.

Jamaicans have a favorite phrase – “***giving back.***” In other words, being generous with your time (and money, and available resources) to help others. Dr. Glassman is a busy man, but what he gives back is much more than a goodwill visit. But firstly – why Jamaica, I asked him? He told me he was vacationing in Negril in the late 1990s when Dr. Irving McKenzie (Dean of the College of Oral Health Sciences) approached him and invited him to give a lecture for the students. Dr. Glassman did so, and returned the following year for a workshop. Through his contacts in Canada, he procured and donated equipment and supplies (and he continues to do so). The visitors always donate their time to conduct outreach with the students, with free health clinics in rural areas.

Moreover, Dr. Glassman has given the recently-founded dental school (its first batch of students will graduate in November 2015) the benefit of his knowledge on the very latest advances in the field. He has been able to impart direct, cutting-edge instruction to the students “*way ahead of the curve,*” he emphasizes – before the text books have been published. He has also offered advice on the College’s curriculum and helped create a clinical manual on endodontics, providing an invaluable “*human resource and knowledge base,*” according to Dr. McKenzie; He has participated in local conferences and workshops. He is constantly writing articles, and when he is not in Jamaica he emails them directly to the students. He shares his knowledge through online webinars that include animations on procedures. So, he is teaching Jamaican students both in Jamaica, and from his base in Canada. “*We are constantly defining new standards,*” says Dr. Glassman. Jamaican students and lecturers are not only benefiting but also actively participating.

One cannot put a monetary value on that.

Now, all this time you may be wondering what endodontics is. It took me a while to ask that question. Dr. Glassman replied in two words: “*Root canals.*” I shuddered involuntarily (I have experienced that myself, twice). “*Endo*” means “inside,” so this means anything that is going on inside the tooth. Dr. Boksman is a general dentist,



“You need to establish a relationship with your students,” says Dr. Glassman. Here, he gets a UTech class going with some “Rapping for Obturation” – yes, that’s a technical term related to endodontics! (Photo: Metropolis Agencies)

doing fillings and restorative work. The canal is a hollow tube containing the nerve that goes down into the root (ouch!) But let us move on. Why is oral health so important?

Oral health (of course this includes the teeth, gums and tongue) is vitally important to one’s general health, the dentists told me. There is a connection with heart health; inflammation is a major source of illness in the body and if it exists in the oral cavity it can enter the blood vessels and cause hardening of the arteries and other problems. Gum disease has a strong connection with diabetes (which is extremely common in Jamaica) so healthy gums are vital. *“People don’t understand the importance of dental health,”* says Dr. Glassman, *“because no one is dying from it.”* Dr. Boksman added that it is not given the priority it deserves.