

Dental Workers Get Down to Business

Fourth in a series

By Mark Baker

Tuesday morning, March 21, 2006

The bus leaves the Hotel Diplomat shortly after 9 a.m. It winds through the busy streets of Cochabamba, past the shops and street vendors.

The bus turns off a main thoroughfare, and onto a narrow side street of cobblestones. A block later, it stops in front of Madre de Dios – Mother of God – one of several houses operated by Amanecer for the street children of Cochabamba.

Inside, the group of volunteers are greeted by Madre de Dios staff. The resident dentist, Vani Salazar Morato, has been working at the shelter for two years. Having spent a year in Naples, Florida, she speaks English fluently. She operates her own private practice Mondays through Fridays in the afternoon. In the mornings, she works at Madre de Dios.

She has three assistants, young girls in training to become dental assistants. They are residents of Madre de Dios, and hope to learn a vocation so they don't have to depend on being a maid for the rest of their lives.

Members of the volunteer team, led by Dr. Michelle Espinoza of San Diego, quiz Salazar about equipment, medication, records and procedures. While the clinic has the basics – two dental chairs and some equipment - it lacks amenities such as x-ray machines, high speed drills and basic medication.

The team sets to work. Dr. Espinoza takes the far chair, because its equipment is functioning best. She is assisted by pre-dental student Joe Kaminski, a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Sheri Vandehaar, a dental hygienist from Chippewa Falls, sets up in the near chair, ready to conduct exams and cleaning. While she examines teeth, she's assisted by Sheri Espinoza, Dr. Espinoza's twin sister. Although Sheri Espinoza works outside of dentistry, she is assisting the team in any way it needs.

The first two patients to enter the room are a girl who looks to be about seven, and a young girl in her early teens. The little girl looks a bit concerned, but the dental workers and Dr. Salazar reassure her that the visit will go well.

“Hola!” says Vandehaar to one young girl. “My name is Sheri.”

Over the course of the next few hours, patients will continue to come in ever 20 minutes or so. Teeth are extracted, teeth are cleaned. Shots of Novocain are given, cheeks become swollen.

Throughout it all, the team maintains high spirits. They talk nonstop to each other about what they are seeing. They instruct the young Bolivian dental assistants on what they are doing and why. Dr. Espinoza, whose father was born in Bolivia and later moved to the U.S., speaks fluent Spanish to the youngsters who lay prone in her chair. Her calm demeanor instantly reassures the young children.

The team is seeing severe dental problems, says Dr. Espanosa.

“We're doing mostly extractions for grossly decayed, non-restorable teeth,” she said.

“We're seeing a lot of abscesses and infection. An abscess is a grossly infected tooth that has gone (untreated) many, many months, and now the infection has gone through the gums and there's swelling. They've had no dental treatment, don't brush their teeth or have any other sort of oral hygiene.

“A lot has to do with their diet. They eat a lot of sugar here, and drink lots of pop because they can’t drink the water. And the carbonation is terrible (for oral hygiene.)”

She said there is more work to be done on many patients than she can do in one day. Often times, the patients need more than one tooth pulled, but she picks out the worst ones in one quadrant of the mouth, and focuses her efforts on that.

“You wouldn’t want to anesthetize the entire mouth, so we’re focusing on the worst one. The infection and the painful tooth is the priority right now.”

Joe Kaminski says he is learning a lot during his time at the clinic. While he has witnessed cleaning of teeth before, this is the first time he’s seen them being extracted.

“It’s pretty cool, actually, although that sounds macabre,” he said. “She’s really good.”

While Dr. Espanoza focuses on extractions, Sheri Vandehaar examines and cleans teeth. She sees what she describes as “rampant decay” in every patient she sees.

“Every child in the chair has complained they are in some level of discomfort,” she said.

When the first patient, the little girl, looked like she was going to panic, Vandehaar asked one of the assistants to fetch a hand mirror. Vandehaar held the mirror so the girl could watch the cleaning, and the girl soon settled down.

“They enjoy holding a mirror,” Vandehaar said. “They can see their teeth go from dirty and yellow to beautiful and bright.

“They all are leaving with a smile on their face,” she said.

When Vandehaar spots really serious trouble, she lets Dr. Espanoza know so the patient can go from one dental chair to the next.

The Bolivian assistants are kept busy the entire time, cleaning instruments and getting various dental tools as needed. The American volunteers thought they’d be working the clinic themselves, meaning they’d have to do the cleaning and prep work being done by the Bolivian girls.

“They treat me like a queen,” said Vandehaar.

“This one,” said Sheri Espinoza, pointing to one young lady, “has worked non-stop since we got here.”

Dr. Espinoza notices a big difference between her patients back in the U.S. and those she is treating today in Bolivia.

“In my private practice, patients don’t tolerate pain well,” said Dr. Espinoza. And then patients complain about being numb for an hour afterwards due to Novocain.”

In Bolivia, she’s finding trust and tolerance of pain. No questions, no whining. Not even tears. Dr. Salazar attributes it to the fact that they’ve lived with pain for so long they’ve come to tolerate it.

Two hours into the work, Sister Mary Therese comes in to see how things are progressing. After checking on several of the patients, she learns that today is Sheri Vandehaar’s birthday. Instantly, Sister leads the entire group in a Spanish rendition of Happy Birthday.

Earlier that morning, while waiting for the bus to leave, Shari Vandehaar had opened a home-made birthday card from her son, Sam. The boy had drawn a picture entitled “Mom helping needy children,” with a smiling dental worker calling out, “Next.”

Then Sister tells Dr. Salazar that the workers should be listening to a CD recorded by the children. Dr. Salazar sends one of her assistants off to get a CD, and soon the sound of happy, enthusiastic singing fills the first floor dental office.

Between patients, Dr. Espinosa admits, "I love dentistry."