

# PRIMARY DENTAL JOURNAL

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## Paediatric Dentistry

Guest editor: Richard Welbury

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# CAREER FOCUS: EXPEDITION DENTISTRY

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**BURJOR LANGDANA** LOVES THE EXCITEMENT, THRILL AND CHALLENGE OF PROVIDING DENTISTRY IN WILDERNESS SITUATIONS. HE TELLS *PDJ* ABOUT WHAT EXPEDITION DENTISTRY INVOLVES AND WHAT MAKES IT SO REWARDING

## Why get into expedition dentistry?

Are you a dentist? Are you relatively fit? Do you enjoy lateral thinking and thrive in a challenging situation? Do you love travelling and exploring new places? If so, expedition dentistry could be for you. Some might think "then why not just join the Armed Services Dental Corps – that ticks all the above boxes?" My answer to that would be "of course" – but if you can't, then getting into expedition dentistry is the next best thing.

## So what is an expedition dentist?

Essentially it's providing dental services out of the comfy, sterile, Care Quality Commission (CQC), NHS environment. There's no receptionist to guard your dental portal, no ever-helpful dental

nurse to do your bidding. All those numerous fancy gizmos that beep, whistle and whirr and make our job so much easier, forget about them too. It's often just you, getting back down to basics. Necessity, they say rightly, is the mother of invention. You develop your long dormant social skills to convince whoever is around to act as your assistant, or a wandering local to help to manage crowd control. Making your own team, leading it and keeping them all happy becomes a necessity.

## What sort of expeditions do you go on?

Essentially there are two types. The first type is a dental camp where you volunteer to provide dental services to

the local people in a remote area in the Global South (Africa, Latin America and developing Asia). The organisation you go with will have advertised and spread the word, so a long line of patients will be awaiting your presence. Dental equipment for these is better, and they may actually have luxuries like a bright light, portable chair, etc. These types of expeditions are a good first introduction. They are easy to get onto, but you might have to pay for travel, boarding and lodging. A rudimentary dental clinic will be in place and the locals will be used to a visiting dentist. And as an added bonus, you come back glowing with a halo of wellbeing that all those years of training have finally come in use to help a very appreciative group of people who don't take their dental treatment for granted.

The second type of expedition are the more adventurous ones. Here your goal is to provide dental emergency care as and when the need arises. This would mainly be for the participants of the expedition, but could involve treating local people en route. You carry your own dental clinic with you (or if you are lucky, someone else does). Your clinic can become anywhere your patient can sit or sleep. The time when you are not doing 'teethy' things, you are supporting the expedition doctor, scientists and other participants in their work. In the past I've judiciously spent



*Burjor assisting in tagging a seal as an expedition dentist with the British Antarctic Survey*

this time helping to weigh penguins, check their stomach contents, oral swab baby seals, make coffee, suture a leg or two and other such stuff. These expeditions are harder to get into, but they often pay for your travel, boarding and lodging.

#### **What attracted you to expedition dentistry?**

The best way to describe my journey to expedition dentistry would be to tell you about my first dental camp, somewhere in a deep rural part of Maharashtra, India in June 1986. There was a heavy monsoon, and transport to the destination was a four-hour, back-breaking bus journey (we got stuck twice!)

When we arrived at the village, we saw a long line of villagers outside the school. We presumed there was another function going on. A welcoming committee guided us to our "clinic" (a school classroom) and proudly stated that long line was for us! Seven hours later, after various yogic postures (both myself and the patients'), a community effort in providing light and crowd control, forced interruptions caused by power cuts and flooding from a leaky roof, we were back in our rickety back-breaker bus heading back for home. I loved it! The communal team of medics, dentists and paramedics, who went there as strangers, had become best of friends. The locals, who were initially in awe of these doctors from the city, were laughing, joking and exchanging food recipes by the end. Our grateful patients wanted to give us a full mango orchard and a goat (we declined – he could have got bus sick).

Since then I have been volunteering, begging, pleading and bargaining to get onto as many expeditions as possible. In fact this has become my biggest goal through my career.



*The dental camp in India during Burjor's very first expedition in 1986*

#### **How do you become an expedition dentist?**

If you are a dental student reading this (and getting excited) you may be wondering what additional training is necessary. A bit more experience and working knowledge in oral surgery is definitely a plus point. In addition, a Wilderness Medical Society (WMS) certified course, such as that run by Expedition and Wilderness Medicine, is well worthwhile. You can meet and network with other like-minded medics. You will receive general outlines of expedition medical problems and how to deal with them, which will be really useful if you are attached to an expedition where you are supporting the expedition doctor. Expedition dental workshops on these courses will give you an idea and the necessary handouts to equip you to teach and run dental training sessions for other medics on the expedition. Medics love to learn dentistry – teaching and empowering them to do simple dental procedures will be the high point of their expedition. The doctor who I supervised in doing an extraction of a third degree mobile incisor still talks about it 10 years later.

The importance of maintaining your physical fitness cannot be underestimated, especially if you are supporting an expedition. You have to carry your dental stuff on top of your regular things. Be prepared to do your work at the end of a physical day. It can be exhausting but you will be rewarded by unforgettable experiences.

#### **What advice do you have for anyone interested in becoming an expedition dentist?**

I've often been asked "can expedition dentistry be your full-time job?" Simply put, no. Does it pay well? Well the amount of money you can get from it won't buy you a Porsche, but possibly a wheel nut for one. So what's so rewarding about it? Imagine yourself in a clinic as a patient vociferously complains of the 20 minute delay and comments strongly that the NHS is getting as bad as health services in the third world. You remember the queue of patients in the pouring rain and their gratefulness of the treatment provided – a benign smile creeps across your face. Or perhaps you are trying a crown and it does not fit. Agitation starts creeping in but, the memory of you chasing baby seals to do their oral swabs makes it all go away. It's the memories and experiences of expedition dentistry that make it so special. It's this that gives me the Dalai Lama-type serenity to deal with those loose lower dentures, units of dental activity (UDA) quotas and other minor irritations of everyday dental life.