

## Section VIII Young Dentists Volunteer Grant 2020 Report from Haneen Alayan

*Editor's note: Haneen Alayan of New Zealand was awarded the Section VIII Young Dentists Volunteer grant in 2020 and elected to participate in the Smiles for the Pacific program in Fiji. Due to COVID-19, Haneen was unable to participate until this September when she visited the dental clinic at the Lautoka Divisional Hospital, Fiji. The following report about her experience was provided by Haneen for publication in this newsletter.*

### **Smiles for the Pacific 2022 Fiji Volunteer Trip**

Smiles for the Pacific is a dental charity established in 2012 by Dr Jonathan Cole and Dr Mahendra Moopna aiming to provide free dental care to a severely underserved region in Fiji as well as help train and upskill the local health professionals. In 2020, ICD very kindly offered me a grant which enabled me to participate in the program. Border closures meant the trip had to be delayed until September 2022 and by the time I was finally able to make it happen, I was the first volunteer back at the hospital for 3 years. Naturally, I had a little anxiety about how the week would go and my main concern was whether I would be capable of providing a standard of treatment I would be satisfied with using limited materials and equipment, especially given that the borders had been closed for so long with nothing coming in or out. That anxiety was validated almost instantly; the suction wasn't working, most of the materials were long expired, most of the tools and equipment I was used to were not available and the only way to use the x-ray machine semi-successfully was to hold it in place.

Very fortunately, the wonderful Karen Gardiner of Ivoclar and Colleen Coulter at GC had donated some composites and bond to take with me at very short notice, therefore solving that problem for me. There was a very weak portable suction that could be used with a saliva ejector and the rest I had to figure out on my own. I won't lie, the first day, the quality of some of the work I did was questionable and I had to live with that as I lay awake at night wondering if the week was going to be a complete waste of time and whether I was going to do more harm than good.

The second day, I came back determined, turned the clinic upside down looking for whatever I could find that would be of use to me and made it work. Litia, a wonderful local dental therapist, was my assistant (without her, all of it would have been impossible) and from the second day onwards, all of the patients received the highest quality of dental treatment that they ever would have had, especially given the fact that we were saving teeth as much as possible and only extracting what was absolutely necessary. We were able to restore many patients to full dental fitness and did as much work as possible on each person and brought some back for second appointments. The local dentists working at the hospital caught wind of what was going on and would come in and observe and ask questions (and sometimes get their own fillings done) and it was a fantastic opportunity to teach them some new techniques. I was made to feel like I was part of the hospital and by the end of it, was very sad to have to say goodbye.



I felt like I had gotten as much back out of the experience as I had given to it and learned many things in a short space of time.

1. Regardless of the obstacles, if you care enough, you will find a way.
2. Every now and again, it's important to be reminded that you should never take for granted all the blessings in your life. Appreciate what you have, because even if it doesn't always feel like much, it's more than most.
3. Even if you're incapable of speaking a word to each other, having good intentions and doing things with genuine care is the most effective form of communication and will always be understood.
4. Sometimes it's important to consider what skills you have to offer before jumping into volunteering. This would have been a serious challenge for someone with less experience and it almost feels like fate intervened and intentionally delayed the trip for two years.
5. We should be less judgemental of poor-quality dental work that comes from less privileged countries. They are doing their best with what they have available and it is extremely challenging.
6. Drowning patients is actually quite difficult to achieve even without suction, which is reassuring.
7. Powdered latex gloves were invented by the Devil himself. My skin and my scrubs (that used to be black but are now white) will eventually recover from the ordeal but the mental scars will likely never fade. Take nitrile gloves with you everywhere, even when you don't need them. Just in case.
8. It should be illegal for me to handwrite notes because I cannot read my own handwriting.



This has been such a genuinely enriching experience, I have come away with a lot of inspiration, many new ideas and a very full heart. I couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity and promise to use it as a springboard to accomplish bigger and better things.

Thank you again to all who were involved in making this happen. Until next time - Bula Vinaka!