

Charlotte Dentist Works with UNC Adams School of Dentistry to Provide Higher Standards of Oral Care in Africa

In 2011, the University of North Carolina Adams School of Dentistry (UNC-SOD) began partnering with the Makerere University College of Health Sciences (MU-CHS) to improve oral care in Makerere's home country of Uganda. Dr. Michael Farmer, DMD, owner of Plaza Midwood Dentistry in Charlotte, has served for the last seven years as an adjunct faculty member at the UNC Dental School, in order to support students interested in international service.

In 2011, a collaboration between Makerere University College of Health Sciences (MU-CHS) and the Adams School of Dentistry at UNC began with the intention of providing preventative care to the residents of the rural Nakasongola District in Uganda. Beginning in 2012, students and faculty from UNC-SOD have traveled annually to the MU-CHS campus at Mulago to develop a collaboration between the schools and the Ugandan Dental Association. Each year, students and graduates of these schools have spent a week at MU-CHS and have worked together in remote clinics in the Nakasongola District providing preventative oral health care as well as extractions, restorations, fluoride treatments, sealants and oral health instructions. As each year passes, the number of treated patients grows incrementally and the construction of a clinic in this region will continue that upward progression.

Summer Service in Uganda



Just this summer, Dr. Farmer accompanied four students from UNC, all wrapping up second-year studies, to spend one week at the Makerere dental program and another serving in northern clinics. "The impact we can make there is tremendous," he said. "These great students can treat hundreds of patients in a region where the ratio of dentists to people is one to 165,000. Here in the US, that figure is one to 2200!"

With each passing year, area residents get the word out that "the dentists are coming." According to Dr. Farmer, who just completed his eighth trip to Uganda, dental professionals in the country see a wide range of conditions and diseases that dentists in America would

perhaps never see. “Since it takes a week’s pay to get to the major city, Kampala, for treatment, men, women, and children often suffer for months at a time waiting for care,” he explained. “We see lots of tumors, sickle cell, HIV, and even diseases we don’t have in the US. We obviously want to provide the care they need and help them change their situation.”

While the clinical conditions are less than desirable—no power, no running water, and no air conditioning, with desktops and tabletops serving as treating tables---getting the work done helps keep Dr. Farmer grounded and grateful while practicing back home in Charlotte.

“Going to Uganda does make you more thankful for what you have,” he said. “You don’t have suction, a light overhead, and I make sure everyone at my office knows how grateful I am to have these comforts and tools. These trips help keep me grounded and focused on why I became a dentist, which is to really help people. All of us think that in dental school, but a lot of dentists get distracted and burned out. Doing this, going and treating people often with severe needs and making a real difference, makes you forget about your production goals and all the accounting and business end of dentistry. Every time I see a patient, whether it’s in Uganda or Charlotte, I’m better able to refocus on each of them.”

Where does he get his drive to go back, year after year? “I guess I was just raised right,” he said. “My grandparents always stressed serving others, and my family has always encouraged me to travel and give back. I went on several foreign and domestic mission trips growing up, and the experiences have really helped me along my own journey.”

Dentist Entrepreneur by Day

Plaza Midwood Dentistry features prominent photo displays of Dr. Farmer’s African adventures, and his staff and patients have been supportive, offering prayers, financial contributions, and donation of supplies to take to his Ugandan friends. The office, which he launched in 2013, serves more than 2,000 active patients. His staff, which began with a front desk professional and a dental assistant, has grown to include a pair of hygienists, another assistant, and another front office professional. Dr. Farmer and his team perform general dentistry, “from implants to dentures, cleaning, and crowns” for children and adults.

This summer’s trip was no disappointment. Dr. Farmer’s team spent a week building relationships with faculty and students at Makerere, the only dental school in Uganda. During week two, the team treated around 100 patients each day, on average, doing pop-up clinics with their friends from the dental school, as well as giving out thousands of toothbrushes. With all of this giveback, you’d forgive Dr. Farmer for feeling good about himself, but he feels that the pleasure is all his. “It really does more for us than them,” he explained. “It’s good for all of us to get a reset, get more perspective on life, through helping others.

Aims for a Permanent Clinic



While Dr. Farmer will keep going to Uganda until he feels like the standards of care are where he'd like to see them, he's also spearheading a new initiative that may affect the level of oral care for generations to come. In collaboration with UNC-SOD and MU-CHS, Dr. Farmer is part of a team raising funds to build a permanent dental clinic in Uganda, as well as gather the necessary resources to produce three to four more dentists each year in the country, a possible increase by one-third over the 12 graduates Makerere sees each year.

The clinic, which will serve medical as well as dental needs, will facilitate a permanent collaboration between UNC and their Ugandan counterparts. "It helps the patients, and it helps us see different kinds of cases, and when our friends join us stateside, they'll see different cases here, too," Farmer said.

And in the coming weeks, Farmer and company are looking to finalize the organization's nonprofit status, so that they can enter a more aggressive fundraising phase.

Richmond Dental and Medical is proud to support international initiatives, like the Uganda Project, of the UNC Adams School of Dentistry, through donation of dental and medical supplies. We are even more proud to support our hometown dentist, Dr. Michael Farmer, as he supervises the work of some of the most talented dental students in the world, as they make an impact in remote regions of Africa.