

Borderless Dentists NZ Experience

Olivia Henzell + Rebecca Chapman (Final year dental students)

Over our summer break we were fortunate to volunteer with the organisation 'Borderless Dentists' based in the town of Mae Sot, near the border between Thailand and Myanmar. This was all made possible by the support Dr Takayuki and Nobuko Abe. Over our week with Taka we experienced a range of care, from extraction based dental treatment in the refugee camps to preventative education programmes based in schools to raise awareness of oral hygiene. The border between Thailand and Myanmar was one we had heard little about in New Zealand, which is surprising given the degree of hardship many have suffered. There are currently 9 refugee camps situated along the border, with the largest being home to up to 50,000 people

We spent two days assisting in the dental department of Meale Camp (largest in the area), treating patients in an extraction only clinic. We are very grateful to Taka's friend, Mr Ono, who was able to accompany us on a tour around the camp on our first day and provide us with information about the history of the camp. The experience was nothing that we could compare to anything we had seen or done in New Zealand. With no prevention programmes set up in the camp, and the people's love of sweet foods and drinks, it is not surprising that their oral health is very poor. We worked alongside Taka and a couple of refugees who had been trained as dental medics. It was a very rewarding couple of days working at the camp, being able to provide treatment to those so much in need.



Our next few days were spent travelling around local migrant schools, helping implement oral health programmes set up by Taka. These included teaching pupils how to brush, raising awareness for oral health and recording the oral health status of pupils at some schools. All the children attending these schools come from the refugee camp or from across the border each morning on the school bus. A lot of these children have no knowledge of tooth brushing practice, or a toothbrush of their own. We were fortunate to help out at some of the schools where we taught the pupils how to brush alongside a sesame street video about oral hygiene. The following day we visited the child recreation centre of the Mae Tao clinic, which was established for higher end care needed by refugees that could not be provided at the camp. These children were often in a similar situation to the children of the migrant schools, with no toothbrush and no knowledge of oral home care. We were able to provide these children with toothbrushes as well as spend the morning playing with them and teaching them how to brush their teeth.



On our final day in Mae Sot we visited the orphanage 'Heavenly Home' which is home to about 50 Burmese orphans, all of which had been abandoned by their parents shortly after being born. Due to the generosity and kind-hearted nature of the 'Mother' and 'Father' in charge, these children are provided with food, love and a strong sense of home. The home survives on the wages of the mother and father and some donations from a group called project Asia. Because of the ever-increasing number, they hope in the future to build a large facility with learning centres, and a home big enough to house 150 orphans. The visit was our last stop of the week before bidding farewell to Mae Sot and our amazing experience.

Our week in Mae Sot was both eye opening and rewarding. We were reminded of all the things we take for granted in the western world, and our dental care system, though not perfect, is something we should be very grateful for. It was a very touching experience seeing all the young children being so happy and loving, living day by day with very little. We are very grateful for Taka and for this life changing opportunity, which has definitely inspired us to undertake more volunteer work in the future. We hope this is only the beginning of our dental volunteering experiences and look forward to giving more in the future to those in need, both in New Zealand and overseas.

