

A short dental diary of a life-altering experience in the Dominican Republic

TEXT: Vasiliki Karathanasi

I am standing sleepless in the boarding gate at Madrid airport waiting to fly to Santo Domingo, where I'll work as a volunteer dentist for two weeks together with five Spanish colleagues. As soon as I landed in Madrid from Athens, I searched for my Spanish colleague and we both rushed in order to weight our luggage and put in order the dental and medical equipment that we're bringing with us.

Sunday 10th of April 2011, 06:05

Surgical kits, composites, more than 10kg of antibiotics, painkillers and anti-inflammatories. Our clothing weighs less than five kilos, as our real "treasure" in this mission is the equipment and the medication, our "weapons" of relief and cure. I check my boarding pass once again. In my mind, Santo Domingo is directly linked to sandy beaches, bachata, meringue, exotic cocktails and palm trees. I still don't have a clear image of the circumstances I'm going to face, of the population I'm going to treat. How can such a paradise on earth, visited by millions of tourists every year have such great needs? How will I react in view of such poverty and misery that I've been told I'm going to experience?

Monday 11th of April 2011, 07:30

I'm having breakfast in a nuns' asylum surrounded by "canas de azucar", endless sugar cane plantations and a part of a jungle. The view is rested and completely lost in the clear blue sky. There is no sign of western living here in Higuera, my new home for the next two weeks. Here, the water and the electricity are available only for a few hours every day and, as malaria is a great existing health threat, we have to travel to the nearest village of El Seybo in order to buy drinkable water. In this part of the island, which is close to the borders with Haiti, basically live illegal immigrants from Haiti under the worldwide set poverty limit. Their "existence" is not formally recognized, thus it is literally doubted. Here, the men work more than ten hours every day, selecting sugar

cane for only 50 pesos (almost 1 Euro), and they have to support their numerous families. Here, the children have to walk almost 5 km in order to get to the nuns' school and receive their "reward", a glass of milk and a slice of bread that they could not have in their home.

Here, the people might have never met a doctor before, and they trust nature to heal their wounds and cure their illness, something that the Westerns have completely forgotten since science and technology became the "new God"... Here, women get married at their 14s and give birth to as many children as they can. Here, the circle of life usually ends at 45. Life is short, but living is intensive and

strongly linked to nature and to the other people. Human connection and constant interaction is what keeps them alive.

Tuesday 12th of April 2011, 12:30

We treat more than 30 patients every day in a simple room on plastic chairs, without light or suction. We only have electricity for a couple of hours every day in order to facilitate surgical tooth extractions and fillings. We need to provide the patients with basic and radical dental treatment, as it remains vague whether they'll have access to dental treatment again or not.

Wednesday 13th of April 2011, 15:25

We have already examined and treated 25 patients. The patients are waiting for us



Fig. 1: The "waiting room" gets crowded every day as soon as the sun rises. - **Fig. 2:** A typical working day in the nun's asylum offering dental help to entire families.

every morning since sunrise with patience. They might have walked more than 6 km in order to get to us. The local radio named “Radio Seybo”, which is directed by the dynamic and philanthropist catholic priest Migueal Angel Gullon and his team, has been announcing our arrival for several weeks now. Moreover, we gave a live radio interview and invited all the people in need to visit us and get dental treatment on a clear volunteer basis.

Thursday 14th of April 2011, 11:00

Today we visited one of the “batteys”, the extremely poor communities, which are spread among the sugar cane plantations and the jungle. The nuns took us there on their old track after an hour of driving through the jungle. The people of batteys built their own small stone houses and are accustomed to a life without “luxuries”

such as water and electricity. The babies grow up among piles of garbage and play with the rest of the children, chewing sugar plants in the open surroundings while the mother (often a teenager) cooks rice for dinner, awaiting the return of her exhausted husband. Our arrival dramatically alters the community’s routine and the residents surround us yelling, laughing and touching us constantly. To them we are the “blanquitas”, the white women who’ve come to help them. We settle down on the ground in the middle of the battey and put our materials on a wooden table that some villagers kindly offered us. Till sunset we work under the 40 °C, enduring the increased humidity and the deficiency of water. We are completely concentrated on our task and try to ignore the absence of “basic” dental facilities. We’ve already learned to trust our texture and put the



Fig. 3: My home in Higuera during the volunteer mission.



Fig. 4: A typical working day in a battey. - **Fig. 5:** Most of the children see a white person or a dentist for the first time and watch us working all day long.

patient's face in the most convenient angle for the proper natural lightening. Moreover, we discover that small masks pieces can serve as effective hemostatic gauges. We've also learned that the first major question to a patient is if he/she has eaten something during the last twelve hours. We have to select the most "vulnerable" patients and offer them a couple of the limited candies that we've brought with us in order to avoid severe hypoglycemia. We always have to take into consideration that both children and adults are malnourished and give them the adequate medical coverage after the dental procedure. Here, a common infection may prove as fatal.

Friday 15th of April 2011, 13:05

While I was treating a young patient one of the nuns called out for help. I rushed towards her and saw a middle-aged hectic man with a bleeding hand. He was a typical worker in the sugar plantation who had deeply cut his palm and was

severely bleeding. The man looked deep in my eyes with trust and full compliance. Otherwise, he would have to travel for at least five hours by car in order to get the nearest medical help. And something like that would require a car and money, presuppositions that he did not fulfill. He simply sipped a little of the locally made rum that his partner handed him and calmly sat down to receive my help. It was the first time in my life that I had to put eight stitches in a palm. The man did not cry or complain for once. He calmly let me help him and HIS help to me was much greater than he will ever realize.

Tuesday 19th of April 2011, 22:30

Just back in the room to change my wet robe that is covered with blood, sweat and dust. I'm still shocked and amazed by the experience that I've just had. A couple of hours ago I decided to accept to treat a modest man who had been impatiently waiting for eight whole hours, although it

was getting really dark. He had walked 11 km in order to come to us and urgently needed two molar extractions due to a growing apstem. Just after we had started, the electricity turbine went out and a heavy tropical storm bursted out. There was no light, only deep darkness that was sporadically disrupted by lightnings. The man was bleeding and the only help I could get were two small candles that a nun was saving “for an emergency only”. That was definitely an emergency, as the man suffered from a growing infection and had developed fever. With the help of the nun and a Spanish colleague after two hours we managed to extract the molars and the coexisted cysts, a typical “surgical” case that was carried out with peace and faith under the special candlelight. That night I felt that the candles literally “lightened up” the eyes of my soul, while the deep appreciation and the wide smile of my patient warmed up my heart.

Tuesday 31st of May 2011

I’m sitting at my desk, recollecting memories from my experience in the Dominican Republic, while listening to “Niagara en bicicleta” of the popular Dominican singer Juan Luis Guerra. Too many emotions, diverse images and multilevel reconsiderations to share with anyone, such an intensive life-altering experience is still “working” deep inside of me. I’ve ended up with knowing that appreciation is the greatest reward of all. It cannot be com-

pared to any amount of money, especially if it is expressed by a wide child’s smile, a true kiss and a warm “abrazo”. I reckon that if the “developed” world reevaluated the eternal human principles and read-opted the human-centric way of thinking and acting, then no “crisis” would be able to threaten our life and jeopardize our future. As I learned from my experience in the REAL Dominican Republic—the one that lies far beyond the well-known touristic zone—if you still have a smile on your face then you have a true fortune and, truly speaking, WHAT or WHO is worth taking this treasure away from you? From now on I decided to invest in the “stock market” of my smile and of the smile of others, what about YOU?

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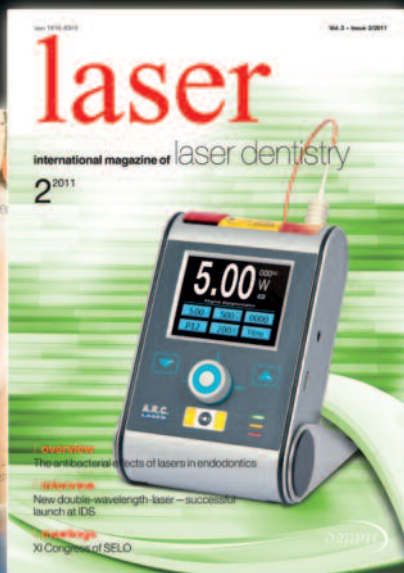
Vasiliki Karathanasi qualified in dentistry and completed the 3-year postgraduate program of Oral Pathology & Medicine at the Dental School of Athens with honours. She contributed in the portfolio development of the ADEE regarding the competences of the modern European dentist. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Oral Pathology & Medicine Dpt f. Research associate of the Dental Oncology Unit, Dental School of Athens, Greece. She has maintained her own dental clinic for the last 7 years.

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