

German dentist launches programme to help domestic violence survivors

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_Victims of domestic violence often suffer both physical and psychological consequences. While some physical wounds gradually heal by themselves, others need professional care. German dentist Dr Jürgen Wahlmann has brought an American project to Germany that offers free dental restoration to men and women survivors of domestic violence.

Founded in 1999, Give Back a Smile (GBAS), the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD)

Charitable Foundation's premier programme, makes it possible to restore the smiles of those who have survived domestic violence and have sustained injuries to the smile zone. With the help of volunteer dentists and generous donors, the programme has helped more than 1,100 survivors to date—a total financial value of more than US\$10 million.

Dr Jürgen Wahlmann, President of the German Society of Cosmetic Dentistry, was inspired to

bring the GBAS programme to Germany after hearing the story of Mona, a domestic violence survivor who sustained injuries to her mouth after being shot at close range by her former partner. Mona spoke at the AACD's Annual Scientific Session in Honolulu, Hawaii, and told attendees how GBAS restored her smile—and helped to change her life.

Wahlmann was so stirred and impressed by Mona's account of courage that he spoke to his fellow board members of the German Society of Cosmetic Dentistry, who agreed to start the GBAS programme in Germany. After the AACD had given its approval, Wahlmann presented the programme to the society's annual meeting. "The response was overwhelming. We hope to make GBAS in Germany as successful as it is in the US. So far, around 20 dentists have shown interest in joining the programme. I would be happy if ten dentists signed up at first," he told **cosmetic dentistry**.

According to Wahlmann, funding should not be a problem. "All participating dentists will work for free. Also, the majority of laboratories have agreed to work without payment. Some dental manufacturers, such as General Implants and Friudent, provide their products for free," he said.

Additionally, fundraising events, such as Bleaching Day, which was held in September, help raise money for the project. On Bleaching Day, dentists all over Germany whitened patients' teeth and donated the proceeds towards GBAS. The bleaching materials required were provided free by American Dental Systems, BriteSmile, Ultradent and other companies.

Both the feedback from dental experts and from those affected has been very positive. "I have an agreement with the domestic violence shelter in Oldenburg. At first, people there were surprised about the project," Wahlmann stated. He added that his GBAS colleague, Prof Martin Jörgens from Düsseldorf, has also received positive feedback.

The treatment of domestic violence victims is often rather complicated. Almost all have experienced trauma and misery over several years and have horrifying stories to tell. Owing to this, they are often unreliable when it comes to keeping appointments. As treatment in most cases entails treatment in stages by a team of specialists, this is a problem.

"Usually, the complete treatment takes six months. Only patients whose teeth have been



Photo: Yuri Arcurs

damaged through domestic violence can be treated within the scope of GBAS. Dentists can easily tell if this is the case. Seventy per cent of all female victims of domestic violence have experienced trauma to the head," Wahlmann told **cosmetic dentistry**. "Another prerequisite for treatment is that the patient has been out of the abusive relationship for at least one year. Statistics show that the risk of a return to this kind of relationship is very high during the first year of separation."

While treating GBAS patients will not be easy, Wahlmann and his colleagues are dedicated to the project. In addition to Mona's story, the touching statement of another US woman contributed to his decision to bring the project to Germany. "After her treatment this woman said that, if she looks into the mirror she does not see the past but the future," Wahlmann said. "Those of us who are fortunate not to have experienced such sorrow should give back some of our fortune in some way."

For more information about the project, please contact Dr Jürgen Wahlmann on +49 4405 4050 or at givebacksmile@drwahlmann.de.