Dental and Oral Diseases in Developing Nations

Many people in developing countries have never had the privilege of seeing a dentist. Dental help is almost non-existent in much of West Africa, and in the other countries Mercy Ships visits, it is unaffordable for the majority of the population. Poor oral hygiene is a risk factor for diseases and can even lead to death.

Oral diseases
The most common oral diseases are dental cavities and periodontal (gum) disease. Thousands of people suffer from dental pain for weeks or months on end, sometimes even years, because of the lack of available dental care.

In developing countries, changing living conditions due to urbanisation and the adoption of western lifestyles are leading to a higher incidence of dental cavities.

Most elderly people in developing countries have few or no teeth left. Although the poor are more vulnerable to this and other problems, oral health issues affect elderly people at every level of society. Low awareness, lack of access to oral health services and the misconception that older people will not benefit from health education and preventive measures such as fluoridation, conspire to deprive the elderly of vital care.

Some oral infections can even be lethal if not treated in a timely fashion. Simple and preventable illnesses, if left untreated, can threaten the very life of the patient.

Statistics (source: WHO)
• 60-90% of school children worldwide have dental cavities.
• Severe periodontal (gum) disease, which may result in tooth loss, is found in 15-20% of middle-aged adults; the rate varies across geographical regions.
• 40-50% of people who are HIV-positive have oral fungal, bacterial or viral infections, which often occur early in the course of HIV infection.
• Oral disease is the fourth most expensive ailment to treat in most industrialised countries.

Transformational health care through Oral Care Programmes
Bringing Hope and Healing
Mercy Ships aims to prevent and reduce the effects of a lack of oral health care by providing dental treatment and dental hygiene education and training. Mercy Ships uses hospital ships complemented by mobile dental clinics to deliver free specialised health care to the world’s forgotten poor.

Extractions & Procedures
Dental service is almost non-existent in many of the countries Mercy Ships visits. Mercy Ships conducts free mobile dental clinics, providing relief from infected or rotting teeth, performing extractions and inserting fillings.

Oral Hygiene Education
Poor oral hygiene and untreated tooth decay can lead to much more serious conditions such as noma. Mercy Ships dental teams work to improve oral health in developing countries through dental hygiene education and the training of local personnel.

Training & Capacity Building
All day workers learn skills and technical competencies, like dental assisting and instrument sterilisation, helping to increase the in-country knowledge base of oral health care. Mercy Ships also, where possible, works alongside local dentists. In doing so, Mercy Ships facilitates an exchange of understanding and expertise between dentists of different cultures who are working within the same discipline.

Accomplishments
Since 1978, Mercy Ships has provided over 305,000 dental treatments to more than 119,000 patients.

Images, case studies and additional information about Mercy Ships can be found online at www.mercyships.org