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PHS Dentists In Sri Lanka



Pictured left to right) Janaka Edirisinghe, Columbo West Rotary; LT Melissa Nazareth; CAPT Gary Blache; U.S. Ambassador Shaun Donnelly; CDR Daniel Hickey; and CDR Lawrence Gaskin.

"If it falls your lot in life to touch the lives of others, be sure you touch them in such a way that you leave them better than you found them." – Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, Former President of Morehouse College

A warm spring evening in March in our Nation's Capitol set the stage for a spectacular dinner hosted by Sri Lankan Ambassador to the United States, His Excellency Dr. Rasaputram, in anticipation of a humanitarian mission to the beautiful island nation formerly known as Ceylon. A contingent of four Dental category Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Corps officers—members of the international volunteer organization Filling-A-Need (FAN)—were bound to cross eleven time zones for the purpose of delivering dental therapy to Sri Lankans in need of basic healthcare.

Departure on April 10 from a snowy John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York gave way 26 hours later to

the balmy breezes of Colombo, Sri Lanka's largest, bustling city. Trading their dental practice settings with the Federal Bureau of Prisons for mobile, ambulatory service clinics throughout the island, CAPT Gary Blache (MCC San Diego), CDR Lawrence "Jeff" Gaskin (FCI Safford), CDR Daniel Hickey (FCI Loretto), and LT Melissa Nazareth (FCI Pekin) hit the ground running. Working under the aegis of the Columbo West branch of Rotary International, the group settled in with their host families and, after a brief cultural introduction to the Sri Lankan way of life, quickly departed the next day for the "Hill Country" and the city of Kandy located in the central section of the country.

The dental mission's first clinic was established near Dambulla, and despite some initial kinks in the operation and adjustments to steamy temperatures, care was rendered to those in need. The following day a second site was established on the outskirts of Kandy; this

clinic was heavily attended and many received treatment. The arrival of the Buddhist New Year provided an "off" day for the doctors; they jumped at the opportunity to explore the proud and rich cultural heritage of Sri Lanka. The incredible rock fortress of Sigiriya, its sheer walls rising more than 200 meters from the surrounding jungle floor, lived up to its reputation as the Eighth Wonder of the world. The ascent was an arduous climb for the team in the fierce midday heat, especially the final summit pitch—and one definitely not suited for vertigo sufferers! The view from the top, however, was absolutely stunning, and one could only imagine Sigiriya at the height of its glory fifteen centuries ago. The team progressed further north to the ancient, royal city of Anuradhapura with its gigantic dagobas, distinctive dome-shaped sacred Buddhist worship sites the size of the great Egyptian pyramids. Here also grows the sacred bo tree (under which the Buddha gained Enlightenment), brought from North India as a sapling to Sri Lanka; it is the oldest historically authenticated tree in the world, having been tended by an uninterrupted succession of guardians for more than 2,000 years.

At the University of Peradeniya Faculty of Dental Science—the sole Dental School in Sri Lanka—Dr. V. Vijayamara hosted his American guests to a tour of the Dental Hospital. The rows of dental operatories brought back memories of University days. A discussion ensued concerning the Rotary's Oral Cancer Screening Service project. Epidemiological data from this worthwhile endeavor

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Director, DCP/HRS/PSC
RADM R. Michael Davidson
Editor Mrs. Virginia Kapusnick

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reveal that 25 to 30 percent of all cancers affecting the population of Sri Lanka are oral cancers. The FAN doctors assisted their hosts with habit intervention, health education programs, and early detection of oral lesions; several patient referrals to specialists were facilitated.

Prior to retiring from Kandy, the doctors were treated to a personal tour of the Dalada Maligawa—The Temple of the Tooth—which houses Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist relic, the sacred tooth of the Buddha. A most helpful monk explained to CDR Hickey that the Buddha, having attained Nirvana and thus perfection, consequently had 40 teeth (not the customary 32!), and that the relic was a maxillary left molar. The Temple, an imposing pink-painted structure with an eye-catching gilded roof and surrounded by a deep moat, had a constant flow of worshipers and flocks of tourists. The elaborate relic chamber, with its stunning frescoes depicting the tooth's history, polished ivory elephant tusks, and magnificent Buddha statues, constituted an unforgettable visual and cultural experience.

The team next headed south to the village of Baddegama; here a third clinic was established. Amidst the continuing celebration of the New Year, the doctors treated young and old alike, including oral examinations, cancer screenings, atraumatic restorative techniques, preventive modalities, and extractions. Rotarian Janaka Edirisinghe, coordinator of the dental mission in Sri Lanka, happily visited his father at the monastery in Baddegama. The conclusion of this remarkable day featured a sumptuous banquet in the monastery's dining hall hosted by the Baddegama monks for the PHS team, an honor rarely accorded outsiders. The sweet milk rice, hot curries, high teas, and exotic environs were extraordinary. That evening the group arrived in Koggala at the southern tip of the island; the warm emerald waters of the Indian Ocean beckoned for rest and relaxation.

A day later a school on the grounds of the Buddhist monastery at Matara was

utilized by the FAN group as a clinical site. In addition to direct outpatient care, CDR Gaskin and LT Nazareth trained two Sri Lankan public health nurses on the progression and prevention of dental diseases, risk management of oral cancers, and basic therapeutic modalities. The team was recognized for their efforts when Southern Province Chief Minister, Honorable Ariya Bulegoda, unexpectedly arrived and, in addition to his presenting certificates of appreciation to the doctors, also had them take lunch with him at his personal residence. The warmth and kindness of Minister Bulegoda, his wife and family remains a treasured moment.

The team moved subsequently to Kataragama, the most important religious pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka. It is a holy site for Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus—a sprawling religious complex containing buildings of all three religions. Devotees laden with offerings moved lightly, barefoot, up the temple steps, escorting the doctors into the innermost sanctuary of the shrine of Lord Ganeesh. There they were blessed for their good deeds in an elaborate ceremony conducted by the head monk.

The return trip to Colombo skirted Ula Walawe National Park, and the Americans witnessed a rare treat—elephants in the wild! One huge tusker was a mere 30 meters from the team's van. Amidst the whirring of cameras, the team continued on and arrived safely in Colombo. The next morning a final clinic was established at the Gangaramaga Temple. This clinic was brief but well attended. In perhaps the most rewarding moment of the entire endeavor, visitors to the Temple from various lands—Africa, Asia, Europe—were moved by the humanitarian nature of the mission and expressed their wholehearted support to the team members for their striving to improve the condition of the human family.

The final day in Sri Lanka was a memorable one. CAPT Blache convinced CDR Hickey to partake a *very* early round of golf at the Colombo Country Club. The venerable former British clubhouse harkened back to Sri Lanka's co-

lonial past; breakfast on the veranda was delicious. The Columbo West Rotary hosted their guests to a splendid downtown luncheon and presented certificates of appreciation. CDR Gaskin, who founded FAN in 1984 with a personal commitment to make a "dental difference" in the world, had been an exchange student in Sri Lanka 26 years ago and had been sponsored by the Rotary. He gave a rousing account of his past and present experiences in Sri Lanka; several Rotarians remembered their friend and warmly renewed acquaintances with him. All in all, it was a marvelous time.

Janaka Edirisinghe and the doctors then had an audience with Mr. Shaun Donnelly, U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka, at the Embassy on the grounds of the U.S. compound. They reported on the successful nature of their work and were heartily congratulated by Mr. Donnelly and the Embassy staff.

The long journey home offered the team time to reflect on their experiences and share insights, and to contemplate the unique opportunities of scholarship and service afforded by a career in the PHS Commissioned Corps.

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