

Una Vida de un Dentista en Bolivia

By Dan MacLellan, DDS'03



The Ivar Mendez International Foundation (IMIF) provides dental care, breakfast, art supplies, and instruction to under-privileged people in La Paz and rural Bolivia. In March 2011, I travelled to the South American nation to work as a volunteer with the IMIF dental program.

Dr. Ivar Mendez is a Halifax-based neurosurgeon originally from Bolivia. The IMIF has six full-time employees, three of which are local dentists, and its head office is in La Paz, Bolivia's largest city and political capital..

Upon arrival in La Paz, I travelled to the communities and villages of Colquencha, Machacamarca, Aucapata, Cosnipata, Huancu, and then back to La Paz. The IMIF has established fully functional dental clinics in Colquencha, Aucapata, and at the CEMSE institution in La Paz.

Colquencha is a community of approximately 4,000 people, located 150 kilometers from La Paz, on the 'altiplano'. Aucapata is a much smaller and more remote village of approximately 900 people, located in the very scenic Andes Mountains. Although it is only 350 kilometers from La Paz, it takes anywhere from 10 to 18 hours to get there by bus because of the rugged terrain and the slow, winding mountainous roadways.

My participation in the IMIF dental program had two major objectives. The first was to help the local dentists treat patients. Copious cola ingestion combined with lack of regular dental hygiene and dental care means that many people have extensive dental caries. Because the people seldom seek

treatment until they experience pain, extraction and the premature loss of teeth are often the result. IMIF dentists, however, have been working with people to prevent caries and preserve teeth, and carrying out root canals wherever possible to save more teeth. More endodontic therapy and sealants have been used in recent years. The most common treatments during my visit were restorations, sealants, root canals, and the extraction of hopeless teeth.

My second objective was to help improve and develop the IMIF dental program. This involved sharing current procedural techniques and treatment philosophies from Canada in an effort to increase preventative procedures and increase the local standards of care, especially in the more remote locations.

My overall experience was very positive. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel and work with the local people. There is no better way to experience a country, I believe. The local patients and dental and medical personnel were very grateful and extremely hospitable. I happened to be in Bolivia during a local festival, so I was able to experience some of the drama and colour of the culture. The scenery is like nothing I've experienced before – utterly remarkable.

Since returning from my trip, I have agreed to join the IMIF as the coordinator of the Volunteer Program in Dentistry. Numerous dentists and dental hygienists who are interested in volunteering in Bolivia have already talked to me about the program.



All inquiries are welcome – please contact me at danielmaclellan@hotmail.com.

