

Dentists on the frontlines

Amid deadly clashes, dentists deliver oral health care in war-torn Iraq

In October 2003, the 502nd Dental Company and the 561st Medical Company (Dental Services) arrived in Abu Fadouse, a small Iraqi village about one hour north of Baghdad, traveling in heavily armored vehicles equipped with machine guns. The soldiers left their vehicles wearing flack jackets. This would offer some protection if they came under attack.

"The residents were cautious at first," said Lt. Col. Jamie P. Houston, DMD, commander of the 502nd. "But curiosity got the better of them. I started speaking with my broken Arabic. They kept saying, 'Mister, mister, do you have toothbrush,' and started brushing their teeth with their fingers to translate. Then I bring out my little 4-inch by 2-inch Iraqi flag and they accept me immediately as their *habibi*, or 'dear one.' I recommended placing Iraqi flags on all our vehicles. I thought that would stimulate some goodwill. Then we revealed our 'inflatable' dental clinic. We removed our weapons to treat them."

For the next seven hours the men and women of the 502nd and the 561st (Lt. Col. Roger Fiedler, DMD, commanding) provided flossing, brushing, oral hygiene instructions, extractions and restorative care to 279 children.

"When they saw that we went to great lengths not to harm them in the dental chair, they relaxed. The first thing they do is take off their shoes [sandals] so as not to dirty our chair," Lt. Col. Houston said. "Then came the

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balloon animals and, yes, candy and small toys. Then we were like long lost friends. The women made 'pita' for us on their outdoor ovens as a token of gratitude."

"We pleased many of the 'clients' that day, but not the men of the village. Our seven hours flew by and we were not able to treat the men. In the Muslim religion, men go first, so we upset some of the villagers, but the feast that the local tribal sheik put on was fabulous."

Dental care wasn't the only reason for the visit. The mission to Abu Fadouse marked the first time that Sunni and Shia Muslims met in the same room to discuss a dual role in community issues, according to the Commander of the Military Intelligence Brigade Lt. Col. Timothy Ryan, who coordinated the mission.

It was one of the many success stories that has united the men and women of the "Five-O-Deuce" (502nd, Ft. Hood, Texas) and the 561st (Vilseck, Germany). Their belief that they could make a difference in the lives of the Iraqi people has endured tremendous hardships,

including blinding dust storms, searing heat, mortar attacks and suicide bombers. Dental school never prepared many of these practitioners for what they experienced in the war.

Under attack

In May, when members of the 502nd were in Fallujah, convoys were frequently in the line of fire. "Capt. [Stephan] Zigo [DDS] and Maj. Scott Burgan's [DDS] team helped with an EMT situation, attempting to triage an injured person and reattach an arm that had been blown off," Lt. Col. Houston said. "We never received this type of training in dental school."

Capt. Todd Sander, DMD, agreed. "We were called on to help a surgical unit treat head and neck lacerations and alveolar and mandibular fractures, in addition to standard dental support," he explained. "When I was a dental student, I never would have guessed I would be part of an experience like this."

Lt. Col. Charles Sabadell, DDS, convoy commander, says, "The most electrifying event



Capt. Hal Rider administers anesthesia to an Iraqi boy prior to an extraction.



Capt. Doug Pratt tells a 10-year-old Iraqi to "open like an alligator."



Capt. AnnaLee Kruyer examines an Iraqi boy with carious lesions to determine a treatment plan.

of the entire deployment occurred when our 12-hour convoy into Iraq came under attack. We were caught in a crossfire between small arms and RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] launchers. The 502nd War Eagles responded as if they had been doing this for years. No injuries were reported, but there was a huge hole in the MILVAN [military van] containing toilet paper.”

Lt. Col. Houston added, “Fortunately, our floss supply was spared.”

The often-grueling conditions under which these dentists have worked boosts confidence in their own skills as a dental practitioner. “I am more confident in my training and abilities,” said Capt. AnnaLee Kruyer, DDS. “After doing surgical extractions in a tent during a sandstorm, with sand falling in your surgical site [and] inadequate lighting... I know I can do almost anything back in the U.S. You become very thankful for the smallest things.”

“This deployment has stressed the importance of fundamentals in dentistry. With limited instruments and materials, I have been able to deliver acceptable dental care in order to return soldiers to the battlefield. This experience has given me more confidence in my own ability,” said Capt. Nelson Butay, DDS.

1st Sgt. Jorge Rodriguez of the 561st has participated in nine humanitarian missions. Capt. Sander and Capt. Ryan Clancy, DDS, were among those team members taking 15 to 18 sick calls per day from American soldiers. Teams in 10 other outlying clinics were working in tents in 136-degree heat. Often during treatment in tents with no air

conditioning, they had to apologize for the sweat dripping onto the patient’s face.

“I’ve gained a new perspective on what our profession is about in the armed services. I can honestly say that our soldiers appreciate having dental care available in the field,” Capt. Zigo explained. “Nothing has brought me greater pride during this deployment than to render dental treatment to a fellow soldier.”

Teamwork a key to success

The 502nd Dental Company includes 18 teams (26 dentists and four hygienists), each composed of a dental officer and assistant. In April 2003, four teams entered Iraq to provide dental support for the combat line and support units. Teamwork has been key.

“Without generator mechanics like of Pfc. Keith Drew and Spc. Susan Restrepo, and our medical maintenance personnel, Sgt. Justin Thurston and Spc. Clayton Knowles, we would not have been able to carry out our mission,” Lt. Col. Houston said. “Their work ethic and talents were more important than our dental degrees. Without our noncommissioned

officers [NCOs] and soldiers, we would not have been mission capable.”

Other teams were stationed in Kuwait for a five-month period that began in April 2003. During that time, the team logged a total of 7,000 patient visits that included removing over 100 wisdom teeth and 250 other extractions; performing 30 root canals and providing 100 cleanings per week, as well as other services such as partial dentures and splints and mouth guards. The remainder of the unit moved to Iraq in September.

Recently, Capt. Sander’s team has been staying in Al-Asad, near Syria, where guerrillas have been infiltrating across the border. Because their dental team is the “only show in town,” unit members frequently work 12-hour shifts to treat the truckloads of American forces.

‘Dangers are real’

Even as the 502nd celebrated Thanksgiving in Balad, Lt. Col. Houston knew that he and his fellow soldiers were at risk. According to the *Associated Press*, November was the bloodiest

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Capt. Darren Forcier examines a 7-year-old Iraqi during Task Force Neighborhood.



Capt. Rider (middle) speaks with an Arabic translator during a 9-year-old Iraqi’s first dental check-up. Spc. Harchand Singh (right) assists in calming the patient.

Special Section

month for coalition troops since the start of the war in March. Guerrillas killed 106 coalition troops; 79 were American.

Despite the danger, members of the 502nd and the 561st continue providing much needed oral health care to both American troops and newly liberated Iraqis.

“My soldiers have only been in-country for three months and are afraid they will not come back alive. The dangers are real,” says Lt. Col. Houston. “Fortunately, we have not lost anyone, but the three memorials I have attended have been unbelievably sad. Soldiers being killed by the very same Iraqi people we are trying to help just doesn’t make any sense.”



Lt. Col. Jamie P. Houston takes time out of his day to do push-ups with two Iraqi boys.

Lt. Col. Houston says that he, his company, and the 561st continue to find ways to bridge gaps between themselves and their Iraqi patients. “I was painfully aware that the children would always wave to us. But I had heard stories of parents who jerked their kids or hit them if they waved back at us,” he said. “I continue to wave and greet them with the

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universal Islamic greeting, *Assalamu Alaikum*, and they usually are surprised and reply in kind. Children are children and they are very appreciative of what we are bringing them. As a health care provider, if this will stimulate them to think more positively about

Americans, then I will passionately pursue this avenue of action, as it may save even one American soldier’s life.”

The opportunity to improve the oral health of so many children has motivated Capt. Kruyer to keep going—even at some low points during her deployment.

In September, when the camps and dental clinics in Kuwait closed, she thought she was going home. The news turned out to be bittersweet: Her unit was sent to Balad, where calling home costs 35 cents a minute and Internet use is limited to half-hour increments.

Homesick

Being so far away during the holidays and special occasions is hard to bear for many soldiers. “I miss my four kids,” says Capt. Kruyer. “I have missed all four of their

birthdays. I missed [celebrating] my 13th wedding anniversary with my husband, and I wasn’t there for Mother’s Day either.”

The 502nd misses other comforts of home, too. “We miss going to the bathroom indoors. We crave things like yogurt, carrots and bananas, Baskin-Robbins and Olive Garden,” Lt. Col. Houston says. With noisy generators running 24 hours a day, they also wouldn’t mind some peace and quiet.

“We miss a lot of things about America, but I wouldn’t trade this experience. My troops think I am crazy to go out on these missions. But if I am going to die, why not go out doing something that will help humanity?” he added. “There is debate about this war right now. We’ll see in five years how much of a difference we made and at what cost. I think, especially with the humanitarian medical and dental missions and building of schools, that we are making a big difference.”

Note: Lt. Col. Houston, Capt. Kruyer, Lt. Col. Sabadell and Capt. Sander are members of the Academy of General Dentistry.

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A 3-year-old Iraqi girl, in full tribal garb, cautiously accepts her ‘poodle’ from Lt. Col. Houston. She was seen for both club foot and a dental screening.



Lt. Col. Houston rewards a boy for his exceptional behavior in the dental chair.