Hurlburt dental team aids and trains West African countries

by Senior Airman Ryan Whitney
1st Special Operations Wing Public Affairs
6/16/2010 - HURLBURT FIELD, FL

Captain Tad Tholstrom (far left) and Staff Sergeant Leah Potter (far right), 1st Special Operations Medical Group dentist and dental technician, operate alongside a local dentist while treating a patient in West Africa. (Courtesy photo)

Two Hurlburt dental Airmen recently returned to work after a one-month temporary duty assignment to West Africa in support of Exercise Flintock, an annual exercise that focuses on improving interoperability between the military forces of the United States, Europe, and Northern and Western African countries.

Capt Tad Tholstrom and SSgt Leah Potter, 1st Special Operations Medical Group dentist and dental technician, participated in the 20-day exercise that began May 3. While there, they provided dental treatment to the African citizens of Senegal and Burkina Faso, while also training and educating local and military dentists from the African countries.

“The people we were supporting were in severely underdeveloped areas; people that were living in mud huts and didn't have a lot of medical options,” SSgt Potter said. “Though we accomplished a lot while we were there, there is always that feeling that there is more you could do or more you could have done while you were there.”

Past Medical Civic Action Programs like these have shown that dental service provides one of the biggest and longest-term impacts on health and welfare, alongside optometry and veterinary services. “Dental is special in the form of treatment because, for the most part, we are able to provide our patients with near-immediate relief. If a person comes to us with an abscessed tooth we can provide on-the-spot treatment and they won't have to worry about that pain anymore, as opposed to something that requires long term treatment when the doctor will only be around for a few weeks,” said Capt Tholstrom. “There is always another patient waiting and you always feel like you could do more so it's pretty overwhelming, but it was very rewarding to help as many people as we did and put our training to use to help those less fortunate.”

Although they worked in austere conditions with the supplies they brought with them and a seemingly endless line of patients, one of the biggest challenges the dental team faced was simply communicating with their patients. Even though they had a translator to decipher the French-speaking
citizens’ words, every town they went to spoke a different dialect, sometimes requiring two or three different translators to effectively communicate.

“Once you learned some of the key phrases and dialects for common sayings, you were able to build up that relationship and trust with them to be able to communicate with them, even if it is just a few sayings,” said Capt Tholstrom.

Many of the patients were treated for the usual toothaches, abscessed teeth, and infections. One case, however, stood out in both the medical professionals’ minds as it involved a small child with a large tooth abscess that had expanded and was starting to obstruct his airway.

“This was one of the most severe cases I had seen, and if we hadn’t helped this child, he probably wouldn’t have survived,” Sergeant Potter said. “For someone in the dental field, it’s rare to say you’ve been able to save someone’s life.”

After treating patients and training and working with dentists in Senegal, the team then joined up with another Air Force Special Operations Command dental team from the 27th Special Operations Wing at Cannon Air Force Base, NM, and traveled to the country of Burkina Faso to discuss different treatment philosophies and procedures, and to train and provide support to local military dental teams.

“The experience we had of helping so many less-fortunate people and improving their quality of life was an amazing experience,” Capt Tholstrom said. “My only regret was I didn’t get to help more people, but I hope to be able to go back in the future to continue what I started.”

These two Air Force dental teams fulfilled the first tasking from a newly stood-up AFSOC Surgeon General initiative, the Irregular Warfare Healthcare Engagement Division.

The Division was established to develop and implement an overarching healthcare engagement strategy in which AFSOC medical forces will be used to support the Department of Defense’s Irregular Warfare and Stability Operations. These medical forces, as exemplified by the dental teams, are organized, trained and equipped to provide medical support to combatant commanders with an emphasis on long-term, medical and healthcare capacity building efforts, efforts in which the Hurlburt dental team participated and contributed to first hand.