

May 2, 2001 Napa Register Front Page World Section

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ENSENADA, MEXICO

A 52-year-old Mexican woman who had never been to a dentist gazed into a hand-held mirror in disbelief. Just 20 minutes earlier her smile was darkened by two huge black cavities on the face of her front teeth. Now they were sparkling white.

"Gracias, gracias," she told Napa dentist Adrian Fenderson, who just finished the work in a tiny village church he and a crew from the Flying Doctors had converted into a temporary clinic. Her eyes welled up with tears.

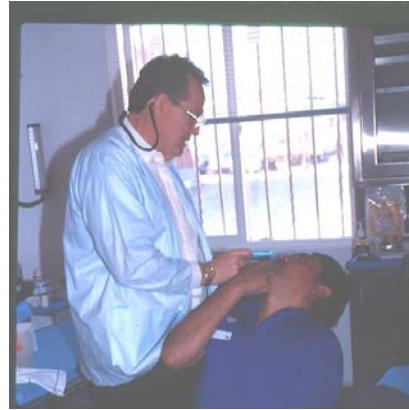
Outside the church in Diez y Siete de Abril, east of Ensenada, a hand-printed sign taped to a gate announced: "Dentista gratis" (free dentist).

The village, named after the date it was incorporated (April 17), was the first of three to be visited on this mission. The clinics have become routine for Fenderson, who has made the trek more than 40 times over the past two decades.

"It changed her whole smile, her whole appearance" he said of the patient. "The biggest reward is the smiles. They are so happy."

He said reactions of his patients vary. "Youngsters are not as appreciative. But some adults jump up and hug me or say a simple `gracias.'"

The biggest reaction comes when the crew packs up. "In smaller villages they come around with gifts. It makes you feel good they are so grateful."



Help arrives

The dental team had arrived at the Mexican Air Force airport in Ensenada by single engine airplane barely three hours earlier.

Team members pulled a pair of yellow church pews together and placed a wooden door on top to create a patient chair. Fenderson sat on a piece of plywood placed over two empty 5-gallon paint cans.

"We improvise a lot," the dentist said.

A lamp attached to his forehead provided just enough illumination for his work in the dimly lit Iglesia Christiana Evangelismo Global church.

Dogs wandered into the church often as villagers of all ages were given numbers and waited up to three hours to be seen. Patients in pain were moved to the front of the line. They ranged from toddlers to a 90-year-old woman.

The church had just enough electrical power to keep a small, portable air compressor operating. It operated air suction used by the dentist and his assistant.

"These are very, very poor towns," the Napa dentist explained. "Some our clinics have dirt floors."

Napa delivers

He operated with equipment donated by virtually every dentist in Napa. "Four or five years ago I needed a modern dental unit that cost about \$1,200. I wrote to every dentist in Napa and said I needed donations. There were no refusals."

The compressor was purchased with leftover cash.

His portable dental office also includes outdated equipment from his own Napa practice.

"I love doing this," he said. "I look forward to this. From the second I finish and get home I start planning the next trip. When I retire from dentistry I plan to do more of this. I really enjoy coming down here. It's a real adventure setting up small clinics. You reap rewards of the heart."

Fenderson said he recently calculated actual expenses and what he would have charged for services in the United States and was astounded to find the total over 20 years at almost \$350,000.

Day 2

The second day of the 4-day excursion started with an early breakfast at a church within walking distance of the Kuku motel, where the team of four stayed in Chupultepec.

The team included Fenderson, dental assistant Sandy Haywood from the San Jose area, pilot Tom Engleman from Saratoga, and this reporter, who in addition to taking notes and pictures helped organize patients and set up the equipment.

Then it was off to the Orphanage Hogar in Zorillo, about 25 miles south of Ensenada. This clinic was set up in a modern room that is still under construction.

As he did at all the clinics, Fenderson played music from a portable cassette player. "Elvis Presley's You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog" seemed to delight and relax even the older patients.

Engleman entertained a dozen kids -- some orphans and some from a nearby school -- by blowing soap bubbles. They took delight in chasing the wind blown globes and popping them with their hands.

An afternoon breeze provided little relief from the hot Mexican sun.

Late in the afternoon, children from the orphanage helped carry the clinic equipment to a public bus stop about a block away, where for five pesos each (about 50 cents) the tired team got a bumpy ride back to the Kuku motel.

Fifty in three days

The final day's clinic was at the church, just up the dirt street from the motel.

Fenderson worked non-stop from 9 a.m. until about 3 p.m., not stopping for lunch.

In all, he treated nearly 50 patients over three days. He performed five root canals and nearly a dozen extractions. One middle age woman whose teeth were in such poor shape that she could not eat solid food had five teeth extracted.

All patients received a dosage of Fenderson's prevention messages, sometimes through volunteer interpreters from the Flying Doctors, other times in his own Spanish.

That night the team bussed into the tourist area of Ensenada for a few hours of well-deserved R and R.

After brunch with Lynette and Alan Doyle, former Napans who moved to a coastal area of Ensenada after retirement, the team checked through customs for the flight home.

Donations needed

The non-profit Flying Doctors, known as Los Medicos Voladores, was founded in 1974. Members participate in monthly 4-day missions to northern Mexico to provide health services and education.

Napans can help. Donations are needed. Doctors, dentists, optometrists, medical assistants, translators, pilots and general volunteers are in short supply.

For information, contact LMV at P.O. Box 455, Los Gatos 95031-0445, or check their website at <http://www.flyingdocs.org/>.