

Our names are Melissa and Mike. We are student dentists studying in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England currently in our final year of dental school. Last summer, we were given time off from our studies to experience dentistry another part of the world. There were many companies offering this kind of opportunity, but we stumbled upon Borderless Dentists and knew we had found the right one.



Borderless Dentists very much appealed to us because it was a small charity providing what looked like amazing work to the Burmese refugees living in Thailand. These refugees have been living in these camps for the past 30 years. Due to the duration of the difficulties in Myanmar, the international attention has been lost recently, regardless of the fact there are still countless people there who need help. The Borderless Dentists website highlighted their passion for helping the people unfortunate enough to be living in such circumstances, some for their whole life. We also felt because it was such a small charity, any donation, be it financial or dental treatment, we would be able to actively see the difference our help made to the refugees, which for us made it worthwhile.

Taka met us as we arrived on the Bus into Mae Sot. Taka was extremely generous to us and advised us through every aspect of our trip. Taka showed us the same kindness that must have inspired him to complete the work he is doing in the Burmese refugee camps, and this made our time spent volunteering our services all the better.

The first week of our stay involved visiting two of the biggest refugee camps. Here we were able to work with refugees whom Taka had taught dental techniques in the refugee camps for when he was not there. This takes volunteering to the next level – teaching the Burmese refugees to undertake



dentistry not only gives those fortunate enough a new skill providing them with potential employment for life, it also makes the refugee camps self-sufficient. This is very important, because of the recent plans to rehouse the Burmese refugees back to Myanmar, which is currently a very controversial topic within the refugee camps.



During our time spent with the refugees, the most surprising aspect was the happiness these people had, and the generosity towards us that they showed. Our work was more than appreciated which was so rewarding, especially in when compared to the treatment we do back in England!

Whilst volunteering, we got the opportunity to work closely with some of the dental refugees whom we became friendly with. These people explained to us their feelings about their situation and went out of their way to show us around their homes and what one might call cities due to the huge size of the refugee camps and the number of houses, shops etc all around. Although we will never have an understanding of what life is really like, this was the most incredible opportunity, one which we will never forget. It must be understood the length of time these people have lived here, the majority remember no other home. These refugee camps have become homes, villages and cities to their population which has drastically increased over the years. These people remember a place where they were chased out of their homes – comparatively, the life they now live is a drastic improvement – the thought of returning (or for some moving for the first time) to Myanmar is met with worry. The homes, friends and family they left have not stayed awaiting their return, instead these people have made new safer lives for themselves, lives they wish to maintain, if only these people were awarded some nationality, it would provide them with much more opportunities to really move forward with their lives.



In the refugee camps, the most common treatments we carried out were extractions in order to get people out of pain. Some fillings and some scaling was completed, but most people still viewed dentistry as an emergency treatment.

Taka also took us to some local migrant schools. Here we were able to examine the children's teeth and treat if necessary. This was so interesting to experience how education is delivered to these more fortunate children. The teachers here were amazing, and the children all so happy and genuinely eager to learn. There was a vast

difference in schools, those with greater funding were quite obvious from the outset, but this did not change the happiness of the children within.



The most touching part of our elective was a visit to the 'Heavenly Home' school. This is a school/home for orphaned children, which from the outset you would expect to be a very sad place. However, Heavenly Home was as if you had been invited into the biggest family home. The teachers were like parents and showed love and care to each and every child. The children were adorable and so wanting of love. All children participated in our oral hygiene demonstration and showed love towards each other; the older children passing around the younger children's toothbrushes. All were interested in learning, regardless of the language barrier. At lunch time, the children all sat together and ate. Once finished, they all picked up their chairs, even those whom the chairs were bigger than themselves, and stacked them in the corner, then gave their bowls to be washed up. The older boys stood at the door and wiped the younger children's faces as they left. The older girls fed the babies bottles downstairs. This was the most loving family, each child looking out for others. This was the most inspiring place we visited and will never forget the beautiful children with such love to give.



Taka allowed us to expand our knowledge and technique, mostly of dental extractions, but also of patient management. This was particularly difficult due to the language barrier, but we soon became good at sign language and picking up on subtle hints if our patients weren't happy. Also, the excellent translators that helped



us with our treatment were always at hand to help with the communication difficulties. It took us a while to adapt to the different instruments than what we learn with in England, however Taka always helped us to be better and our clinical dentistry benefitted massively. Taka was an excellent mentor and we learnt some valuable techniques which have proved useful since. Although we were working under pressure in a totally new environment, Taka was calm

and took time to make sure we were coping; at no point did we feel we were out of our depth with him there. Mae Tao clinic was an incredible place. So many volunteers from all around the world provided the Burmese refugees with an amazing variety of medical treatments, such as eye surgery, maternity wards, acupuncture and many more including the hospital settings. This is such an amazing but necessary place, and one which we felt very fortunate to be a part of.

It is very difficult to explain our time here, due to the differences between our lives and theirs. These people were the friendliest, happiest and most generous, we felt so lucky to have been able to help them. We wish we could have done more, and we know in the future, when we are qualified dentists we will return, and will hopefully be able to provide more help to such a wonderful cause. However, the only way to truly understand the experience we had is to experience it yourself.

We would both like to thanks Taka for giving us the opportunity to come and work with him, he was an excellent dentist, mentor and friend. We look forward to seeing you again in the future.

