

THE FLYING DOCTORS



For over 20 years, Dr. Adrian Fenderson has donated his time and resources to Los Medicos Voladores, the Flying Doctors. His passion for doing his best for his patients under whatever circumstances prevail started when he was in the Army in Vietnam. On a Saturday or Sunday, he would take a jeep or helicopter, depending on the distance, and go into little Vietnamese villages to perform free dentistry. The makeshift clinics could be anywhere from a school to the mayor's front porch, and there may have been fighting there yesterday or later that day, but when the dentist was in town, the guns were silent.

Upon returning to the US and setting up practice, he found he missed the adventure of figuring out technical challenges and the smiles of thankfulness he had received on his missions of mercy.

At a dental society meeting he met the founder of Los Medicos Voladores, The Flying Doctors, and immediately signed on. He was on a trip within the month. The Flying Doctors is a non-profit organization begun in 1974 by 2 concerned medical practitioners and an engineer/pilot. It has now become a diverse group of medical professionals, pilots, and volunteers dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the people of Northern Mexico, Baja California, and Central America by providing free health care and education to rural villages. Physicians, dentists, optometrists, nurses, physical therapists, medical and dental assistants, pilots, translators, audiologists and general volunteers all have active roles in Los Medicos Voladores.

Most trips to Mexico are 4 days long and consist of flying in a small aircraft to tiny town in Mexico, setting up a fully operational clinic in a school, church, or medical clinic and seeing patients from 8:00AM to 8:00PM to lines of locals. Dr. Fenderson has used doors and obstetric tables for dental chairs. He has functioned without electricity and had to bring his own water.

He was even present when a planeload of his friends did not make the runway and were all lost. Still he goes because there are so many who need so much and he loves to see the new smiles. He used to donate all the supplies he used from his own supplies, but he has found that other local dentists will often help with that expense if they are asked. Still all costs relating to the trips, including food, lodging, and airplane expenses, come out of his pocket, as the Flying Doctors are all volunteers and there is little outside funding.

Week long trips to El Salvador in 2002 and to Nicaragua in 2003 have provided those nations with the skills and services of the Flying Doctors. In November of 2002 Dr. Fenderson traveled to El Salvador. A nation beset by years of civil war, then Hurricane Hugo, and finally 2 devastating earthquakes has few resources for medical or dental care. He was among a team of dentists, opticians, and medical doctors who daily had to turn away many because there simply was not enough time to treat them all.

When asked what kind of care he usually provides on his trips, Dr. Fenderson says that it is not at all like the cosmetic dentistry and smile design that he does in his Napa practice. Many of the villages are so remote that to reach a dentist, a local would have to travel a day by bus, spend more than a day's wages to be seen by a Mexican dentist, and then travel a day back home. That is simply more than these villagers can afford, so they become very stoic, tolerating great pain for prolonged periods of time. When the Flying Doctors go to a village for the first few times, most of his dental care must be treating pain, often by the removal of the teeth. In Napa he would often offer sedation dentistry to those requiring such prolonged care, but the locals express no fear or apprehension when seeing a dentist. Instead they welcome the opportunity to be out of pain. After several trips to a village, more general dentistry can be done to those not in pain, and there is time for more cosmetic care and tooth colored fillings.

Over the past 25 years, Dr. Fenderson has made more than 40 trips to Mexico and was amazed to realize that the cost of the trips and what he would have charged for such services here in Napa would total about \$350,000! But he does not just limit his philanthropic work to Mexico. With a free tooth whitening program he and his All About Smiles dental team have raised \$14,500 for Smiles for Life, a partner in Garth Brooks' Teammates for Kids Foundation. With an identical whitening program, he has also raised over \$17,000 for Molly's Angels. He feels strongly about his association with these causes, stating that it is the smiles of grateful patients and participation with such worthy causes that bring joy.