Dental placement in Iloilo, Philippines 2015

Last summer, me and my classmate went to the Philippines for a two-week-long dental placement in Iloilo city, organised by Work The World. Despite our very long and troubled journey to Iloilo, I must say our trip was amazing from day one. Our programme manager's assistant Vicky, who has really been like a mum and a friend to us, picked us up at the airport at around 12AM and took us to our house at Iloilo, where we stayed together with other dental and medical students. There, the most incredible surprise was awaiting us – home-cooked dinner, even at this hour. That is how wonderful the whole team in the Philippines was every day.

The next day we had our induction. First, we went to the Town Hall, where we watched a presentation about the dental care and dental health in the region and were told the names of our supervisors for the following week. After that, me and other students got a chance to see a little bit of the city.

![Jeepney: public transport in Iloilo](image)

From the next day on, I began my dental placement with Dr. Gancero and her nurse Analyn, or dental aid, as they are called in the Philippines, who are amazing as people, dental care professionals and teachers. Every morning we saw patients in Barangay clinics (small public clinics), in the poorer parts of the city. They looked like ordinary rooms with a dental chair and no air conditioning, which was challenging with temperatures over 30°C and humidity of around 80%. In these clinics, the only treatment provided is extraction. Because of people’s incomes, limited resources in the region, and the way health care is set, this is the only treatment most patients can afford. Most of the patients we saw came with severe pain, recurrent inflammation or severe periodontitis and had teeth extracted there and then, or occasionally only got prescribed antibiotics. Patients around there usually only visit the dentist when they are in a lot of pain, therefore, we often did not see too many patients on a day. Even so, I have seen more extractions in two weeks in Iloilo than I had in my life before.

My role in the clinics was observational at the beginning. Later, Dr. Gancero let me assist her by applying topical anaesthetic before she injected a local anaesthetic and by swabbing the wounds after extractions. Moreover, she let me do a basic examination of patients’ hard oral tissues under her supervision. Even though it may sound trivial, for me as a just-finished first year student it was more hands-on experience than I have ever had before and I gained confidence in using a dental mirror, judging whether a tooth is decayed or not, and generally working with patients. Furthermore, many of the patients did not speak English at all or only very little, which meant my supervisor had to translate, and I used the very few
words of Hiligaynon (the local language) I had learned at lessons Work the World provided for us. This seemed like a major challenge, as I had never talked to anyone who did not speak a common language, let alone examine their mouth. Fortunately, thanks to my supervisor this was rarely a problem.

Dental chair in a Barangay clinic  Me and first grade children in a primary school

After our duty at the clinics was finished, we would go for a delicious lunch, as Philippine food is great, and in the afternoon we would visit primary schools and day care centres. This was a part of a government programme, that focuses on prevention of oral disease in children. The three groups they concentrate on are pre-school children (3-5 years old), first and fifth graders. Visiting primary schools in Iloilo was one of the highlights of my whole trip, as these children were extremely nice and happy to see us even though I did not blend in the group, as I was always the only white and the tallest person in the room. At the same time, it was obvious how much work still needs to be done in this region to improve their oral health and hygiene. In these schools, we applied fissure sealants on the children's permanent molars, fluoride varnish, and we talked to them about oral hygiene. One of the most shocking experiences for me was when Dr. Gancero asked the class (of over 20 children) who's parents had taught them how to brush their teeth and only 4 kids raised their hands.

Following these experiences, probably the most important and strongest message I took away from this placement, was that you have to do your best to provide care and make the most of your circumstances. Even if there is no autoclave to sterilise instruments, or there are no long needles for a “proper” (as we do it in Europe) anaesthesia, you have to provide the treatment to the patient. Even though I would not pass my exams if I did some of the procedures the way they normally do in Barangay clinics, in those conditions, it is the best they can do and undoubtedly better than letting patients be in pain. In the UK, people probably cannot imagine for children to receive dental treatment in their classroom, yet it is still the most effective way dental caries can be prevented at that scale in Iloilo.

Luckily though, the whole trip was not all about work and dentistry, and we got to see a little bit of the gorgeous country that the Philippines are. On Friday, we took a boat ride to spend our day at a beach of Guimaras island, which is famous for its mangoes, that are reportedly consumed by the Royal Family and in the White House. I can confirm, that they
are the most delicious mangoes I have ever tasted. The next day, about 20 of us went to the western part of the island, where Iloilo is located (Panay), to the province of Antique, which is one of the most beautiful parts of the country according to locals. Indeed, we had the opportunity to see beautiful hills, rice terraces and, most importantly – waterfalls, which formed natural swimming pools with crystal clear water, where we swam. Unfortunately, in the afternoon I started to feel sick and feverish, so I went back to our accommodation. My temperature kept rising and did not drop in the morning. As a result, I missed the second half of the trip and one day of my placement. I have to admit, I was decided to change my flight and go home. Luckily, everyone at the house, including Work The World team convinced me to stay, and I couldn’t be happier to have stayed in the end.

My trip to Iloilo was undeniably one of the best parts of my last long summer holiday. Despite being the only two first year students in the house, we had a great time, and I personally recommend doing a placement like this, or any other volunteering experience to everyone who wants to learn, do something productive and see the world at the same time.