

Mercy Ships Brings Volunteer Dentists to Africa

Mercy Ships volunteer dental professionals are in Lomé, Togo, alongside the Africa Mercy, the world's largest privately owned hospital ship, to give kids a smile.

Mercy Ships medical professionals hold free dental consultations not far from the ship, which recently docked in the West African port for its fifth visit since 1990.

According to the World Health Organization, the entire country of Togo has only 19 dentists—less than one dentist for every 10,000 people. That compares to 16 dentists per 10,000 people in the United States.

“While there are lots of opportunities to be a **volunteer dentist** around the world, I was immediately drawn to Mercy Ships,” says Dr. Doug Daehlin, one of more than 400 Mercy Ships crew members currently volunteering their expertise in Togo. “During my volunteer service, I will work side-by-side with dental colleagues from other parts of the U.S. and around the world. Our collaboration and exchange is an invaluable experience.”

Oral health is an integral part of general health. Oral disease directly affects quality of life by seriously hindering an individual's well-being and ability to effectively participate in society. Also, nutritional intake is negatively impacted by incapacity to chew. However, few people in sub-Saharan Africa receive adequate dental care.

Decaying teeth are extracted to relieve pain, often by minimally trained personnel, without tools or expertise to perform restorative functions. Decay is typically left untreated until it becomes so extensive and so painful that extraction is the only option. As a result, patients are often

in danger of serious infection, further stressing an already weak immune system.

During the six-month port visit, volunteer professional medical crew onboard the Africa Mercy hope to provide more than 1,250 free surgeries and 11,000 dental procedures. Additionally, ship's volunteers will offer basic oral health education to 400 elementary and secondary students and to 4,000 individuals in the dental clinics' waiting areas. In addition, several local Togolese will be mentored in various aspects of assisting, sterilizing and teaching oral hygiene.

"I am pleased that for the fifth time Mercy Ships is coming to Togo and helping with their humanitarian mission," says Charles Kondi, Agba Minister of Health. "This helps the Ministry of Health and the government to help the Togolese, especially those who do not have means."