

# The Development of the Aru Dental School in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dr Graham A Toulmin AM BDS (Syd) FICD

Email: graham.toulmin@gmail.com Blog: dentalsafariafrica.blogspot.com



## 2012 March Visit to Aru (DRC)

This visit was to discuss and develop a plan for building a dental training school in Aru as part of the **ISTM** (Superior Institute for Medical Techniques).

**Bishop Ande** (colourful shirt) was the visionary who had inaugurated the government-accredited ISTM in 2010 and the two buildings shown (with the blue roofing iron) are classrooms for High Level Medical Nursing Training (A1 Standard).

The Bishop allocated the large flat area of land (arrowed and photos right) as the site of the Dental Training School, with the building to commence when funds were available. The problem was no funds were available. But it doesn't hurt to dream and plan for the future.



## 2013 October - The 3 year A1 Dental Course begins with 5 students

From left:

**Elie Byandi** 22 years old from Bukavu; no dental experience; trained as a lab technician

**Irene Akoch** 21 years old from Aru; no dental experience;

**Constantin Drumo** from Aru; 52 years old; married 7 children; A2 Level Dentist with 7 years experience; was the dentist in charge at our dental clinic in Mahagi which started in 2010. Good practitioner needing a higher qualification.

**Aimé Dhekana** from Bunia - 21 years old; no dental experience.

**Ringo Wanzirendi** from Butembo; 42 years old; married 7 children; no qualifications but 20 years experience doing dentistry, having learned his skills in an apprentice-type position at first, then with Nursing qualification and dental experience, became the dentist in charge at the Anglican Dental Clinic in Butembo. Good practitioner needing proper government-approved qualifications.



**The Course consisted mainly of medical subjects in the first year** with a minimum of dental input due to the government curriculum and the absence of a qualified dentist to teach. Various things were tried to recruit a permanent dentist to come and head up the course but the salary was very small and they were unsuccessful in getting a permanent Director of the Dental School.

**There were many problems to solve** - the need for a dedicated building, the need for a permanent Head of the Dental Faculty, the fact they had no dental equipment and the only access to a dental clinic was at the Anglican Hospital 2 kilometres away.(right)





## January 2014 - I made my 'last visit' to the Congo.

I visited two out of the three clinics I had set up - firstly the clinic in Aru (1). I was disappointed that the project to build the dental school building hadn't been able to get off the ground for various reasons in 2013.

*I was unable, given time restrictions, to visit the Mahagi dental clinic which some dental colleagues and a generous patient had sponsored and which opened in 2010 (2)*  
The next stop was the main dental clinic in Butembo (3), named after my wife, the Mama Wendy Dental Clinic, which has been kept in excellent condition and has a great reputation after 21 years although the equipment is now old and needs replacing.

During our time there we, the dental team, carried out the 2nd East Congo Dental Conference (sponsored by Springwood Rotary in Australia, with the chief speaker, Dr Peter Ratcliffe, a retired Maxillo-Facial Surgeon doing 10 lectures).

At the end of the conference, I made my farewell speech and thought that my 27 year connection with the DR Congo (formerly Zaire) was over.

## Then some surprising events began to take place:

### The June Surprise - Anglican Aid received a very large donation!

Anglican Aid's CEO, the Rev David Mansfield had contacted me in 2013 and had encouraged me to 'come on board as a fund-raiser with a passion for the Congo' and proposed that if I could raise \$30,000, they would match it, dollar for dollar, making a possible total amount of \$60,000 to complete the project to build the dental training building.

The whole project was tax deductible and was called:

### TREAT Congo Dental

Now, in Australia, to build any kind of dental training facility would not give you much change out of two or three million dollars. I had written a proposal in 2011 with Alan Kelshaw and Kerry Bartlett which estimated that this dental training school could cost in the region of a million US dollars. But where do you get a million dollars? So in consultation with our African friends and Anglican Aid we decided to just concentrate on achieving the more modest goal of \$60,000 as a start. *(Now remember this is in Africa, where a dollar does the work of 10 in the west. They make their own bricks, labour is very cheap and the main costs are cement and roofing iron.)*

**TREAT** is an acronym standing for

- \* Training
- \* Research
- \* Education
- \* Amenities
- \* Treatment



Then this wonderfully-generous donation arrived out of the blue which changed everything. We had reached our first goal. Now we can start planning. I knew this would take a lot of time and commitment so I had to make a hard decision handed in my resignation. My focus now was on getting this project off the ground.

### The August Surprises

Keith Mentiplay is a dental equipment 'fundi' (Swahili for expert) and in 2013 I asked him about helping me out with the technical side of this Congo Dental School project and he seemed interested. Then a year went by, no funds meant nothing happened. When the June surprise happened I contacted him and we decided to move ahead.

At the same time I ran into a friend, Greg Donaldson, who is an aeronautical engineer with the RAAF and loves tinkering with things so that gave me an idea. I started to wonder whether Keith and Greg should meet to discuss the problem of dental suction.

I have another friend, (I know it's amazing, isn't it?), Kerry Bartlett, who just happens to have a heart for helping me help the Congo. So I got all three together. Kerry wouldn't say his gifts were in the technical realm, he is more a facilitator like myself, so we left Keith and Greg to chat about gaskets and super glue and dental suction and went and did some planning.

Keith also brought an old Adec portable chair and demonstrated the robustness of this equipment and Greg is helping to rehabilitate it.

I had cleaned out my garage in anticipation of acquiring some dental equipment when a local dentist, Ernst Kroon, phoned me about his retirement and donated the first items for the Aru Dental School. We are on our way.



## A surprise phone call from a Canberra Dental Clinic:



"Do you want a couple of dental chairs?" "Yes please"  
"Well come on down & get them!"  
(Ingrid Hewlett from Dental Health Program, Canberra)



## The September Surprise Visit to Congo

Anglican Aid sponsored myself and Keith Mentiplay to return to the Congo in September for planning the proposed Aru Dental School in detail. This trip wouldn't have happened without that surprise donation and because of that I suggested to Wendy that the time was right to return to Congo to say a proper goodbye. After all, I added, it's been 10 years since you visited Congo. On each of the 7 visits I have made since then, people are always saying 'Where is Mama Wendy?' I had been asked by Bishop Ande on a previous visit if I would come back and run the dental course, but because of family and work commitments it was impossible back then to even consider it. But now, things had changed - Wendy's mum had died 18 months earlier and she had resigned from Langham Partnership after 35 years involvement. The need for a trained dentist was obvious and over the period of this two week visit we both thought "Why not?" So we applied to CMS when we got home and in mid 2015 we will return to the Congo for 4 years.



## The October Surprises: more chairs and more dental supplies



Thank you to the dentists who have contributed their equipment, the architect who drew up the plan, the Dental Health Program in Canberra and Henry Schein Halas Dental Supply Company who have supported my Congo work for 20 years. Amazing!



Thank you also to friends I have met in coffee shops and student dental clinics who have offered assistance, blokes who have turned up out of the blue to help us unload heavy equipment, There's the tailor who is making surgical gowns, the clergy, wardens and parishioners at Springwood Anglican churches who have stored our container and are supporting us and sending us out with the Church Missionary Society NSW as mission partners to help our brothers and sisters in the Congo get this Dental School up and running.



This project has ongoing needs naturally and the next goal is to ship the container and to pay customs when it arrives so if you want to help and also make it tax deductible contact **Anglican Aid**.

We are guessing we will need \$20,000. The falling Australian dollar makes everything a little more difficult.

To donate and obtain tax deductibility go to <https://www.thankq.net.au/donate/V247/Donate1.aspx?>