Kids in Africa get a healthy smile

Mercy Ships, a global charity, is putting an international twist on bringing smiles to kids. Give Kids a Smile® Day, observed the first Friday in February by the American Dental Association, is a day when dentists in the United States offer free oral care to children of low-income families.

This year, an estimated 39,000 kids in the United States will receive free services.

Mercy Ships operates the world’s largest non-governmental hospital ship, serving the poor in West Africa.

The programs offered when Mercy Ships serves a nation range from life-changing surgeries to physician training.

Mercy Ships also operates a dental clinic that provides dental work for individuals free of charge.

In essence, the dental team celebrates “Bring Kids a Smile Day” every day. In 2010, the Mercy Ships dental team performed approximately 15,000 procedures on 8,000 patients.

Men, women and children come each day to the clinic. Not only do the patients receive dental treatment, but they also receive instruction about dental hygiene while they wait for their turn to see a professional dentist.

In addition to treating children in the dental clinic, Mercy Ships dental hygienists, such as Donna Men, women and children come each day to the clinic. Not only do the patients receive dental treatment, but they also receive instruction about dental hygiene while they wait for their turn to see a professional dentist. In addition to treating children in the dental clinic, Mercy Ships dental hygienists, such as Donna

Bartholomew of Elk Grove, Calif., take time to visit schools and teach kids how to take care of their teeth.

During a recent field service in Togo, West Africa, Bartholomew spoke to a classroom full of kids at an elementary school. Many of them had never brushed their teeth or ever owned a toothbrush.

Bartholomew warned the children, “Bad health will lead to cavities; holes in your teeth that will pain you.”

She then showed them how to brush correctly, asking one of the students to demonstrate in front of the class. At the end of the presenting dental health tips, the students were taught how to brush correctly.

Each February, the American Dental Association (ADA) sponsors National Children’s Dental Health Month (NCDHM) to raise awareness about the importance of oral health. NCDHM’s messages and materials have reached millions of people in communities across the country.

Developing good habits at an early age and scheduling regular dental visits helps children get a good start on a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums.

The ADA has free resources on its website that can help dentists with oral health presentations and ideas for the classroom, as well as coloring and activity sheets that can be used as handouts. The ADA also has booklets, videos and other materials available for purchase through the ADA Catalog.

The 2011 NCDHM campaign features a two-sided, poster with the McGrum Twins, Flossy and Buck, along with their new best friends and next door neighbors, Den and Gen Smiley, reminding children: “A Healthy Smile? It’s Easy to Find! Remember to brush & floss every day!”

On the opposite side, pre-teens/
sentation, every child received a bright red toothbrush.

Mercy Ships Chief Dental Officer Dag Tvedt of Norway believes that children in developing countries are more tolerant to pain in a dentist’s chair compared to children in the developed world. He has provided dental treatment for thousands of children in West Africa.

Most people would not think that kids would get a smile while being in a dentist’s chair. Sometimes, however, the treatment they receive alleviates their pain.

Tvedt is a vital part of the Mercy Ships dental team, and he encourages prevention through dental hygiene instruction in the region served by Mercy Ships.

Due to the lack of trained dentists in West African countries, people who live in this region typically do not have any knowledge of dental hygiene.

Dental education at a young age will help decrease dental problems in the future. The Mercy Ships dental team performs extractions of teeth every day.

The team hopes that through prevention, the amount of extractions will decrease. Correct hygiene can prevent extractions and painful procedures down the road.

You may watch a short video where Mercy Ships Chief Dental Officer Dag Tvedt of Norway discusses the dental team’s work with children at www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFsYOC4UWiY.

The spirit of Give Kids a Smile Day is to remember those children who cannot afford yearly dental checkups. Mercy Ships believes kids deserve a smile everyday.

The dental care provided by Mercy Ships meets a critical need in the developing countries of West Africa and gives many children a bright and beautiful smile.

About Give Kids A Smile Day

Each year on the first Friday in February, thousands of U.S. dentists and their dental team members provide free oral health care services to children from low-income families across the country.

The American Dental Association’s Give Kids A Smile program enhances the oral health of large numbers of needy children.

Give Kids A Smile activities also highlight for policy-makers the ongoing challenges that low-income families face in finding dental care.

About Mercy Ships

Mercy Ships uses hospital ships to deliver free, world-class health care services to those without access in the developing world.

Founded in 1978 by Don and Deven Stephens, Mercy Ships has worked in more than 70 countries providing services valued at more than $808 million, impacting more than 2.5 million direct beneficiaries.

Each year Mercy Ships has more than 1,200 volunteers from more than 40 nations.

Professionals — including surgeons, dentists, nurses, health care trainers, teachers, cooks, seamen, engineers and agriculturists — donate their time and skills to the effort.

Mercy Ships seeks to become the face of love in action, bringing hope and healing to the poor. For more information, visit www.mercyships.org.