

## **New Austrian Fellow, Dr. Peter Schopf, gives an account of the Dental Project in Burkina Faso, West Africa**

The project started in the Autumn of 1997 when I heard from a retired carpenter, Franz Grandits, about the hospital he had founded in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Franz wanted to expand the hospital by providing it with a dental clinic. Having had several meetings with him, I decided to go to Burkina Faso myself to look at the situation and evaluate the requirements.

### **Geography**

Burkina Faso is a state of West Africa with a population of 11 million people, covering an area of 274 000 square miles, approximately the size of West-Germany. It is part of the Sahel zone and its northern area is slowly becoming desert. The climate is not at all friendly. It is hot and dry. The long dry periods with very low rainfall result in a lack of water and very poor soil. Farming is the main occupation of the people of Burkina Faso. The principal products are millet, corn, peanuts, yams and a variety of vegetables.

### **Population and Dental Problems**

The total population of Burkina Faso is 11 million. Approximately one million live in the capital, Ouagadougou. About 80% of the people are illiterate even though there is an obligatory school attendance of 6 yrs.

There are twenty-five dentists for the entire state. Seventeen of these work in the capital, Ouagadougou, leaving the remaining eight dentists to care for 10 million people around the country. The main dental problems are a high rate of caries and a high incidence of gingivitis caused primarily by bad nutrition and the habit of chewing raw millet. Oral hygiene is something practically unknown. Raw millet contains silicic acid and starch. The combination of both in poorly-cleaned mouths contributes to the high rate of caries and gingivitis. A general lack of vitamins adds further to the high incidence of gingivitis from which 80% of the people suffer. The rate of HIV infection is 25% and growing. Infections of the mouth due to bad teeth literally leads to death in this part of the world.

### **The Aims of the Project**

My aims for the Project are:

- To create a dental centre which will provide the rural areas with essential dental treatment in conservation, periodontal treatment, surgical treatment and prosthetics
- To educate the school children concerning oral hygiene and nutrition
- To try to reach the adults so that they too are a part of this learning process.

I believe the project will need to be supported and supervised for 10 years. I feel this period of time is necessary in order to assure it is established on a firm footing for the people of Burkino Faso. I hope by then to be able to hand it over entirely to the local authorities. Through experience I know that it is only projects supported over a long period which bring results and are sustained locally.

### **Funding**

Coming back to Austria I began looking for financial support and medical equipment. I was amazed at how many dental companies and private people were immediately ready to participate in this project. Donations were given from Germany, Austria, Belgium, Lichtenstein and France for the construction of the dental clinic building.

It took approximately one year of preparation to get all the equipment to Burkina Faso and have it adapted to the conditions of the Sahel. I was only able to have this done because of the unbelievable abilities of a sensational man, Rudi Holler. He is a brilliant Austrian technician who constructed and adapted the equipment for the clinic. He can repair and construct anything from pieces of scrap. We call him the Austrian McGyver!

### **The Opening of the Clinic**

In June 2000 the clinic was officially opened. Since then, about ten different European teams have been going regularly to Burkina Faso on a voluntary basis, paying their own way. Each time a team goes there, more medical supplies (all donations) are taken, thus guaranteeing the continued working of the clinic. The teams spend two to three weeks in Burkina Faso.

### **Nursing and Dental Technician Staff**

During the first year while seeking funding for the project, I organized training for a local male nurse to come to Austria and learn basic dentistry at the University of Graz and also at my surgery. By basic dentistry I mean that he learned how to remove plaque, how to do fillings and how to extract teeth. He also learned about oral hygiene and nutrition. It was no problem for him to work at the university of Graz as the head of the dental department, Prof. Bratschko, has himself been to Burkina Faso and was impressed by the clinic.

The next part of the project is the setting up of a dental laboratory in Burkino Faso. I am currently hoping to find an appropriate person to train in Austria as a dental-technician.

### **Future Hope**

This project has built up in such a short time because people have seen that the money they donate has been totally invested in Burkino Faso and not in administration or useless pamphlets.

I will be very glad if it continues to develop the way it started. If any ICD Fellow would like more information about the clinic, I will gladly send it to him.

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