

Dr. Laurie Houston - Dental Globe Trotting: The Importance of International Charitable Dental Missions

Chiraz: Today I welcome Dr. Laurie Houston, general dentist from Muskoka ON. In addition to her two days a week of practice, Dr. Houston is a globe trotter, participating in international charitable missions that provide dental care to those who otherwise wouldn't have access to it. To date, she has participated in 19 projects and plans to get at it once again this coming fall. She is here to share her insights and experience. Dr. Houston, thank you very much for taking the time to do the interview and welcome to this Oasis Conversation.

Dr. Houston: Thank you so much, Chiraz.

Chiraz: So, this is inherently a conversation about the importance of charity work in dentistry. I'd like to start by asking you, how did this passion and commitment to charitable dental work begin for you? What sparked this passion?

Dr. Houston: Well, even as a young child, I always knew I wanted to do charitable work in other countries, not just, my own as well, but in other countries. And I don't know how it started, how these thoughts started for myself, but I always felt that way. I then went to an international school with students from 42 different countries. So, I was very lucky to get a scholarship to Lester B. Pearson College on Vancouver Island. And so, I was introduced to a large number of cultures and also able to see the discrepancies in the economic environment in which my fellow students lived in their own countries.

Chiraz: So, many individuals in the field of dentistry argue that there are underserved populations right here in Canada and that dentists will, would better use their skills and efforts to help those in need here rather than in remote or international places. How important do you think it is for Canadian dentists be part of these international charitable missions?

Dr. Houston: Well, on the first point, I do believe there is a problem in our own country that there are people who are under-served. There are a lot of programs available in most of the provinces to try and catch people who are in the economic environment where they can't afford to have dentistry, but it's very basic services. And, there are some agencies that are doing charitable work. In fact, there's one in Halliburton that I participated in a few times, that they do charitable dental work, free of charge to their local community. So, there are some grassroot organizations and I certainly encourage that to happen on a greater scale. In terms of the international work, in spite of the fact that there is poverty in our own country, the poverty in our country compared to some other countries is night and day. I've been to countries, such as Haiti where I have not, I cannot believe how impoverished these people are. Just living day to day is a struggle and people in some of these countries actually die from dental

infections. It's not an unusual thing to happen. So, there is certainly a need in quite a few third world countries to help in this regard and it's also a really incredible learning experience for the dentist, for not only learning about other cultures, but you learn a lot about yourself as well.

Chiraz: These missions are somewhat strenuous. I mean, there are, I believe, some characteristics that differentiate the people who are invested in these, in these trips and missions and activities. What is the optimal profile of the dentist to be able to successfully participate in these missions?

Dr. Houston: Well, you have to be adaptable, so you have to be able to think outside the box. You have to be able to use what you have in your circumstances. Now, having said that, I'm very adamant in my missions to do things as close to our infection control protocols in our country as possible. I take a sterilizer, I bag the instruments, I can't do it up to the standards of our country, but I'm very close. You have to be able to perhaps not have your favorite instruments every time and the working environments can be pretty challenging. It's often very hot, very humid. And you have to work with the patients in a situation which is not, it's not a dental chair. So, you have to be adaptable.

Chiraz: And how do you personally prepare yourself for these trips? I mean, you're taking yourself out of your comfort zone. How do you prepare yourself for these trips?

Dr. Houston: Well, you know, it's been a learning experience and every trip I learn something new and it is also my experience has been invaluable in making me more adaptable myself. But the big thing for me is to prepare as well as I possibly can before I leave my own country. So, I do a checklist for everything. I check to make sure the equipment is all working before I go. And I also, whoever's on my team, and my teams are always small, I make them aware of the challenges they're going to face so that they're properly prepared when we get to the country as well.

Chiraz: I'm tempted to ask you to tell us more about, I mean, give us an idea about the trips that you've done, but I'd like to keep that for other posts and other interviews on Oasis. And I know that you've been to Kenya and I planning to do an interview with you about that. But can you, can you give us a glimpse of. I don't know, an anecdote on one of your trips?

Dr. Houston: I can think of several. One particular experience was in Jamaica where I was working with an American organization and I believe there were seven other dentists in the community center I was working in and word had gotten around with these dentists that I had been on many missions. And so one of the dentists came up to me and said that there was a woman with a gunshot wound who was terrified and that they didn't feel they could look after her properly

because they were worried about her trauma and they were also worried about the difficulty of the extractions because her teeth had all been smashed below the gum line below the bone line, actually. So, the biggest challenge for me was not the dentistry because I'm very confident in doing the extractions. The biggest challenge for me in that situation was dealing with this poor woman who had also already been tremendously traumatized.

Dr. Houston: And here, I was going to probably traumatize her again. So, my challenge was to make her as comfortable as possible, to make her realize that I was there to help her. And what I chose to do was to have half the extractions in one day and half on another day, a few days later, because I felt it was too much for her to handle it all at once. And a woman who walked in shaking and trembling and crying on the first day, came back the second day and jumped into the chair and said, let's go. So, that is a huge, feel-good feeling you get from doing something like that is incredible. You feel like you've really made a difference in someone's life.

Chiraz: For sure. So, now Dr. Houston, before we close the conversation, what is your call to action to dentists? Would you encourage them to be part of these trips and missions?

Dr. Houston: I absolutely encourage dentists to be part of these trips and missions. You learn so much about the world around you. You get outside your comfort zone, which is always a good thing. It makes you grow as a person. And the return you get, the rewards you get from these sort of experiences far outweighs the difficulties. You end up making incredible friends who are part of your team. And, you also make friends in these different countries who are there as support people to help with the work you're doing, and you learn about different cultures. It's incredible what it gives back to you and I would encourage anyone to come and join me on one of my missions knowing that they have to come with the right intentions.

Chiraz: For sure. Dr. Houston it's a pleasure to see you meet you and talk to you. I hope to host you again on Oasis as I promised to speak a little bit more about these particular missions. Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me.

Dr. Houston: Thank you so much for taking this time with me Chiraz