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GENARO MOLINA/Los Angeles Times

HELPING HANDS: A dental hygienist and an assistant work on a patient during the August 2009 Remote Area Medical health clinic at the Forum in Inglewood. Another RAM clinic starts there Tuesday.

Amid chaos, grateful smiles

At a public mega-clinic, dentists and hygienists helped many in need

SANDY BANKS
Getting your teeth cleaned isn't high on anybody's list of favorite things.



So when dental hygienist P.J. Attebery showed up with her planers and curettes at a free medical clinic in the Forum last year, she was prepared for the crowds, the questions, the chaos. But she wasn't prepared for the gratitude. "We deal with fear and anxiety and procrastinators every day," said Attebery, a hygienist for 25 years. "And here we were people waiting in line 24, 48, 72 hours, just to have their teeth cleaned."

The clinic was sponsored by Remote Area Medical, a foundation begun 25 years ago to bring medical care to Third World countries, and now making the rounds of the nation's big cities.

Last August, during its first visit to Los Angeles, almost 7,000 would-be patients crowded the Forum parking lot. Organizers were unprepared for the crush; hundreds of people were turned away.

Dentists, especially, were in short supply then. About 30 turned out, when 100 were needed. "The people we're seeing here have teeth as bad as the people in the Upper Amazon," RAM founder Stan Brock told *The Times*' Steve Lopez then.

This year, hygienists such as Attebery helped expand the volunteer corps. More than 70 dentists are expected on the clinic's first day Tuesday, along with hundreds of technicians and

hygienists. Last year, some dentists were reluctant to shut down their private practices for a day "for an unknown," Attebery said. "Nobody knew what it would be like."

But the volunteers became evangelists, and the signup list kept growing. "They told everybody else 'You missed out,'" she said. "That it wasn't what they gave, but what they received. About all the positive energy. That they had never been in a situation that made them feel this way before."

"We're calling this 'the Woodstock of dentistry.'"

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It was nice to hear such an upbeat spin. My image—as an outside observer—of last year's clinic was less Woodstock and more Hurricane Katrina.

Job losses, budget cuts and foreclosures had swept through here like a cyclone, and the Forum lot in Inglewood called to mind New Orleans' Superdome.

It's one thing to debate healthcare reform and mull over economic markers, or to wrestle with insurance companies over policy limits and deductibles. It's something entirely different to see thousands of desperate people in one of the most privileged cities in the nation lining up day after day in the sun because they can't afford eyeglasses, root canals, mammograms.

"I never dreamed that somebody could spend a whole day outside the Forum, sleep overnight in the parking lot and wait outside the whole next day, just to get a filling," said Roger Fieldman, president of the Los Angeles Oral Health

Foundation and coordinator of this year's dental volunteers.

Volunteers last year filled more than 5,500 cavities and pulled 2,200 rotten teeth, and on the final day they still wanted to do more.

"That day really put me through an emotional winger," Fieldman recalled. Patients, worried they might not be seen, "were getting anxious and ornery." Volunteers were drained from working 15 hours straight. "I was getting short with people, which I'd never done," he said.

"I looked at P.J., who had been there from 6 in the morning until 8:30 at night, and said 'Why don't you just go home?'"

Attebery kept on cleaning teeth. "No way could we walk away," she told me, "with people begging to be seen."

Some volunteers went beyond the professional. Like Manhattan Beach dentist John Shafer, who showed up one day with a carpenter's belt and went to work assembling chairs, then returned the next morning with his dental tools and did root canals. Others were pushed to look beyond mouths and molars by the uncommon lack of privacy.

"You don't always think of dentists as being the most personable people," Attebery said. "But we were all working within earshot of one another, and I was blown away by the compassion and kindness I heard."

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Dental care is one of the most pressing needs among the low-income and working poor. Dental benefits were eliminated by the state's

Medi-Cal program in budget cuts last year, so the need this year is expected to be even greater than last.

"It's something that people put on the back burner, especially when they have more acute medical needs," Attebery said. "Then the dental problems get worse and begin to affect their overall health."

Some patients were embarrassed to see public dental care last year, she said. "They'd start right in: 'I've always had health-care my whole life.'"

"As soon as I get back on my feet, I'll take care of this." "It's not that I'm negligent."

"It was heart-breaking, the kind of choices they had to make."

Like the middle-aged law student who was jobless and trying to change careers. He had to miss several days of class to get broken and missing teeth repaired and replaced.

"It was a very exhaustive process," Attebery recalled. His professors were upset with him; he was falling behind in class. "He worried that he was jeopardizing his progress. But I have to do this so I can be successful," he told us.

"This was his only chance. And he was so grateful for it. And when he smiled at the end and we saw the confidence it gave him, we really felt we had changed a life. He told me how much better he felt about everything..." "It's tear-jerking stuff," she said. "And it still amazes me."

Follow coverage of the clinic at www.latimes.com/news/health/la-free-clinic.

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