

## DENTISTRY IN NIGERIA AND THE UNITED STATES



Dr Esuola and her husband Pastor Esuola.

### Dentistry on Wheels

The practice of modern dentistry began in Nigeria in 1915, when the national government employed the first dentist in Lagos.(1)

Since then, dental services have become available in both the public and private sectors-through Dental Centres in government General/Specialist Hospitals and Armed Forces Hospitals and through metropolitan dental clinics, respectively. However, these services are based almost exclusively in the country's urban centers, and dental care for residents of the rural areas is limited to occasional visits from government-employed dentists and a few local dental hygienists.(2)

As of 2004, approximately 20% of the 2,482 registered dentists in Nigeria were practicing in the rural regions, where over 70% of the national population lives.(3) Access to dental services is scarce even in the urban areas, considering that as of 2003, only 2 dentists were available per 100,000 humans in Nigeria compared with 1.63 dentists per 1,000 humans in the USA.(5)

The paucity of dental services and the lack of a coordinated national strategy for preventive dental care are reflected in the poor national oral health in Nigeria. Although few nationwide oral surveys have been conducted and most reports are based on intermittent convenience sampling, the available literature still present a telling picture of the current and emerging oral health problems observed in the Nigerian population.(2)

The prevalence of periodontal disease with deep pocketing in Nigerians 15 years of age or older has been reported to range from 15% to 58%, and has

been linked to oral hygiene and socioeconomic class. Although the percentage of Nigerians with dental cavities is reported to be low, ranging from 4% to 30%, the restorative treatment need - or cavities left untreated - is 80% compared with 10% to 24% in the United States.(2,14). Additionally, the prevalence of cavities has been on the rise, particularly among the urban populations. A likely explanation for this increase is the gradual transition from traditional Nigerian diet to Western foods high in refined sugars that is more commonly observed in urbanized communities. By as early as 1975, 87% of urban and rural respondents polled in a survey had admitted to regular intake of sweets as well as sweet foods as snacks.(10) This explanation is corroborated by the finding that the prevalence of cavities was higher in second molars than first molars in urban Nigerians.

In the United States 57 DMD/DDS programs are accredited for its population of 300 million.(3,4,5) In Nigeria, 4 dental schools are accredited in Nigeria for its national population of over 131 million. The first program for training accredited dentists was established in 1965 and the other 3 in 1975. These schools, all in the southwest, are funded by the Nigerian government's National University Commission, and undergraduate dental tuition is subsidized in full. Despite the generous financial aid, as of 2004, each school only boasted an average annual graduating class of 30 or 120 graduates in total - compared with 4,139 dental school graduates in the USA in 2000.(3)

An explanation for the shortage of dentists in Nigeria is that fewer are trained than the population needs. Another explanation is that dentists leave Nigeria to practice in other countries. According to a 2001 survey, 69% of recent Nigerian dental graduates expressed a desire to practice elsewhere, mostly due to economic motivations.

One dentist who left Nigeria to practice in the United States is Dr Anu Esuola. Dr Esuola has recently garnered recognition for creating Dentistry on Wheels, a branch facility of her practice Gentle Dental Care, LLC in Largo, Maryland. Dentistry on Wheels is a privately owned and operated dental service that brings convenient, comprehensive, and affordable dental care to children and uninsured low-income residents by providing standard care aboard a state-of-the-art dental van, one spin of the wheel at a time. Inspiration for the dental van first came to Dr. Esuola through her work for the toothpaste manufacturer Colgate on screening vans that offered dental screenings, oral health kits, and educational materials to children. After 4 months of raising finances with assistance from her husband, Dr Esuola unveiled Dentistry on Wheels on 27 March

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The van is a large, white, remodeled recreational vehicle-features both an audiovisual-equipped reception area as well as a clinical area fully equipped dentist's chair, autoclave, x-ray facilities to treat patients on site. Dental procedures typically performed at a general dentist's office - for example, oral care education, screenings, cleanings, and fillings - are provided on the dental van for little or no charge. Additionally, referrals to local dental care providers are issued to patients requiring further treatment. The van is run by an international staff of clinicians and support personnel, and makes regular visits to schools, daycare centers, churches, nursing homes, and other organizations in the greater Washington DC area.

Someday, Dr Esuola hopes to have three vans in operation for Dentistry on Wheels, so that everyone in the Washington area who needs help will receive it. However, accomplishing this will be a challenge, considering that just one outing in the dental van costs USD2,000 in supplies and services, and that despite plaudits by various local communities and officials, none have offered her assistance with funding. For now, the only things helping Dr Esuola get through are faith, the passion to take care of people, and the knowledge that she is truly making a difference in the lives of patients such as Jide Okeowo, who after receiving treatment aboard the van said in an interview with Washington Post, "I'm very happy. I don't have insurance, and I wouldn't have been able to pay very much. This is a relief for me and people like me to have a place like this to go."(18)

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