



## Risking Life and Limb to Deliver Smiles



### Delivering equipment and education to rural Nepal

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Over my many years at Critical Dental, I have delivered dentistry equipment to all kinds of hard-to-access practices and surgeries. Last September, however, was the first time that a delivery nearly killed me.

The Ekantakuna-Tikabhairab Road in Central Nepal follows the ridges of a winding mountain range south of Kathmandu. I don't know if it would be called a road in Australia, as this mountain pass made our fire trails and dirt tracks look like perfectly paved promenades.

There were about eighty of us on a rickety, old bus- and two goats. Our left-hand side windows revealed a sheer wall of crumbling cliff-side, with piles of rocks and boulders at its base- the result of regular rock falls. Landslides are common in this part of Nepal, especially after the 2015 earthquake which killed 9000 people; but I was more worried about the other side of the bus...



To our right (for those brave enough to look) was a sudden drop that went all the way down to the river below. It was a tight squeeze for our bus, but large trucks would regularly come the opposite way to us, as they carried rocks and sand up from the valley floor. Each time this happened, our bus would have to wait at the very edge of the precipice, and you could feel the road crumble away and fall to the valley below. So it became quite a common occurrence to find our bus with three wheels on the gravel- and one spinning over the edge of the mountain. Our Australian vernacular has several sayings which perfectly express my fear and my body's reaction to it at that point, but I have been asked to keep this article G-Rated. So, for lack of a better phrase-it was scary.



I was on this bus as a guest of Doctor Sandra Meihubers, whose Teeth and Toilets dental outreach program brings dental and sanitation equipment to remote communities. I had met Dr Meihubers through Rotary and the A.D.A, and she had called me only four weeks before heading to Nepal to see if I could donate some dental equipment. It seemed like a wonderful (if not sudden) opportunity to give back, so I decided to volunteer some equipment and my time- and I bought myself a ticket to Kathmandu. However, each time our bus veered over the edge of the pass... I did think back to that phone call and wonder whether I made the right choice.

The plan for this trip was to get to the earthquake-ravaged villages of Bhattandana and Bahunepati. These remote communities had been some of the worst affected by the 2015 Earthquake. In

Bhattandana alone, over 100 homes had been destroyed or badly damaged, and we were there to deliver tarpaulins, food and much needed dental and sanitation supplies.

When we finally arrived at Shree Himaljyoti School to set up our dental clinic, we first had to carry all of our dental equipment down an old goat track to the school. I was handed a sturdy, oil free compressor to carry down the track; and while the old stairs along the track didn't look too safe... after that bus trip, it was nice to have our feet back on any kind of ground- but not for long.

We were almost there, when one of the rock stairs under my feet collapsed, and I was forced to make a tough decision: drop the compressor- or fall. Having just been through that bus ride just to deliver this equipment, I wasn't about to let it get damaged on arrival. So I wrapped my arms around the compressor, fell down the goat track and received a large hole in my elbow for the trouble. It was quite an impressive wound and it was bleeding profusely. Luckily, we managed to scrounge up some veterinary needles and some old pliers to perform a field suture. Sadly, we were without the luxuries of anesthetic. As I mentioned earlier, I have been asked to keep this article G-rated, so for lack of a better phrase- it was painful.

The next day, despite our best efforts and my horse-needed suture, infection set in and my hand blew up to five times its regular size. So, fearing the infection would get into the bone, I had to be rushed to a hospital many kilometers away, along another mountain pass. I assure you that having an infected arm did not improve my travels along the pass.

Two days later, my hand was back to its normal size and I was back at the school; the views from which were nothing short of spectacular. While the nearby village had received considerable damage during the earthquake, the school seemed to escape practically unscathed. It was a beautiful, two story building on the edge of the hillside, surrounded by trees, and with uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountain ranges. It's hard to imagine a more magical location for a school.

The kids at the school were equally magical, and everyone smiled with great big smiles as they greeted us- but some of them were suffering terribly. One fifteen-year-old girl had a tooth that was so badly decayed it was barely a tooth anymore at all. Sadly, while most of the villagers eat only what they can grow, they are starting to get more access to sugary foods. So over the next four days our team examined 241 people and we had to perform 403 fillings and 97 extractions. After all of these years in the industry, this was my first time as a dental nurse, and being able to help all of these kids was an amazing experience which I'll never forget.

**"After examining 241 people, they had performed 403 fillings and 97 extractions"**

At the time of writing this, Dr. Meihubers has recently gone back once again to continue her work with Teeth and Toilets, and they've now got it set up so that volunteer teams visit these villages twice a year. The program also teaches local children about proper, dental hygiene, and provides them with fluoride toothpaste.



However, it's not just the kids of Nepal that benefit from the help of Australian volunteers. The A.D.A has plenty of resources on similar volunteer opportunities all over the world, which you'll find on the 'Volunteering Projects' section of their website. So whether you're thinking of donating your money or your time, trust me; you get so much out of giving back... even if it's just a little bit. I promise that (for lack of a better phrase)- **it's magic.**

**"You get so much out of giving back- even just a little bit."**

