

Member making a difference in northwest Ghana

Many AAOMS fellows and members generously help patients in unfortunate circumstances in the United States and abroad. Giving Back is a new, occasional feature that will highlight the volunteerism of oral and maxillofacial surgeons. Send story ideas to AAOMS Editorial Manager Sarah Trotto at strotto@aaoms.org.

Paul Ciuci, DMD, MD, FACS, took the first step toward a generous undertaking with a simple gift.

In 2015, a Catholic missionary from Ghana visited Dr. Ciuci's church asking for donations to drill a hole for access to clean water in the West African country. Dr. Ciuci not only funded the well – he became friends with the missionary and kept up with the progress of the project, which concluded in 2016.

The missionary, Peter Claver Sutinga, told Dr. Ciuci he needed to see the area surrounding the well in rural northwest Ghana firsthand.

In 2017, Dr. Ciuci did so. He encountered grass huts, dirt roads, little electricity, no running water and minimal healthcare – including no local recourse for oral health issues. The closest dentist was more than three hours away and sometimes unavailable. The second-closest dentist was five hours away. And those living in these remote villages had no reliable means of transportation.

"They don't have anyone to take care of them when it comes to oral surgery," Dr. Ciuci said. "And there hadn't been an oral surgeon in that area for as long as they could remember."

Dr. Ciuci had just one question for the villagers he met on his trip: "How can I help?"

The answer was water, books and oral healthcare. After the 2017 trip, Dr. Ciuci formed a nonprofit foundation – Hearts United in Giving (HUG) International – with a mission of bringing access to clean water, supporting local schools with educational materials and providing oral healthcare to those in rural parts of the world.

On his second trip, Dr. Ciuci returned with dental instrumentation, his surgical assistant, a friend and 1,000 books. They treated more than 80 patients ranging in age from younger than 10 to their 80s. Conditions included caries, periodontal disease, severe dental attrition and oral pathology. A nearby hospital could provide support for larger surgical issues.



"Whatever they needed, we provided care," Dr. Ciuci said. "The plan has always been, if larger cases present themselves, we have to find a date and time to go back, and I'm always willing to do that."

The difference between treating patients in Ghana versus the United States was stark to Dr. Ciuci. He was surprised how much he could do with so little.

"In the U.S., we have an abundance of instrumentation," Dr. Ciuci said. "We have so much stuff at our disposal, and we can do almost anything with very precise instruments. Over there, we go with the basics, and you would be surprised how much you can do with the basics. Very little goes a very long way for these people."



through treatment, books, access to water



Left page top: Dr. Paul Ciuci interacts with children at a rural school in northwest Ghana. Bottom: The schools Dr. Ciuci visited had minimal supplies and few, if any, books. This page clockwise from top left: The villages Dr. Ciuci visited had no resources for oral health issues; Hearts United in Giving International provides books and other educational materials to schools in need; Dr. Ciuci treated numerous patients during his March visit; (from left) Dr. Ciuci with missionary Peter Claver Sutinga and hospital administrator Remy Nyewie in Ghana.

The reception Dr. Ciuci received overwhelmed him. The villagers were so thankful, he said he felt unable to say “no” to returning.

Dr. Ciuci revisited in March after finishing his duties as a member of the 2018-19 Examination Committee for ABOMS.

At the Martyrs of Uganda Health Centre in Bole, Ghana, Dr. Ciuci treated more than 60 patients in temperatures reaching 100 degrees. He and his team also visited more-remote villages, providing care at local clinics as well as supplies for the clinics to keep.

“Every year, we get bigger and have a greater impact on these local communities,” Dr. Ciuci said. “Once we started going, they rely on it. They want to know when we’re coming back. We’ve made lifelong friends over there, and we look forward to seeing them again.”

He said OMSs are especially needed in remote regions of the world because of their expertise – they can provide more services with fewer surgeons because of their training in the scope of oral and maxillofacial surgical procedures and techniques.

“The best way for oral surgeons to help is to just do something – to take action even if it is just a little step,” Dr. Ciuci said. “But once you take that step, it leads to more steps and, before you know it, something wonderful has really blossomed. The experience is so gratifying and humbling, and everyone should do it. You just have to take that one step out of your comfort zone.” ■