

Dentists in the Zoo

Documentation of the Free Clinic at New Orleans

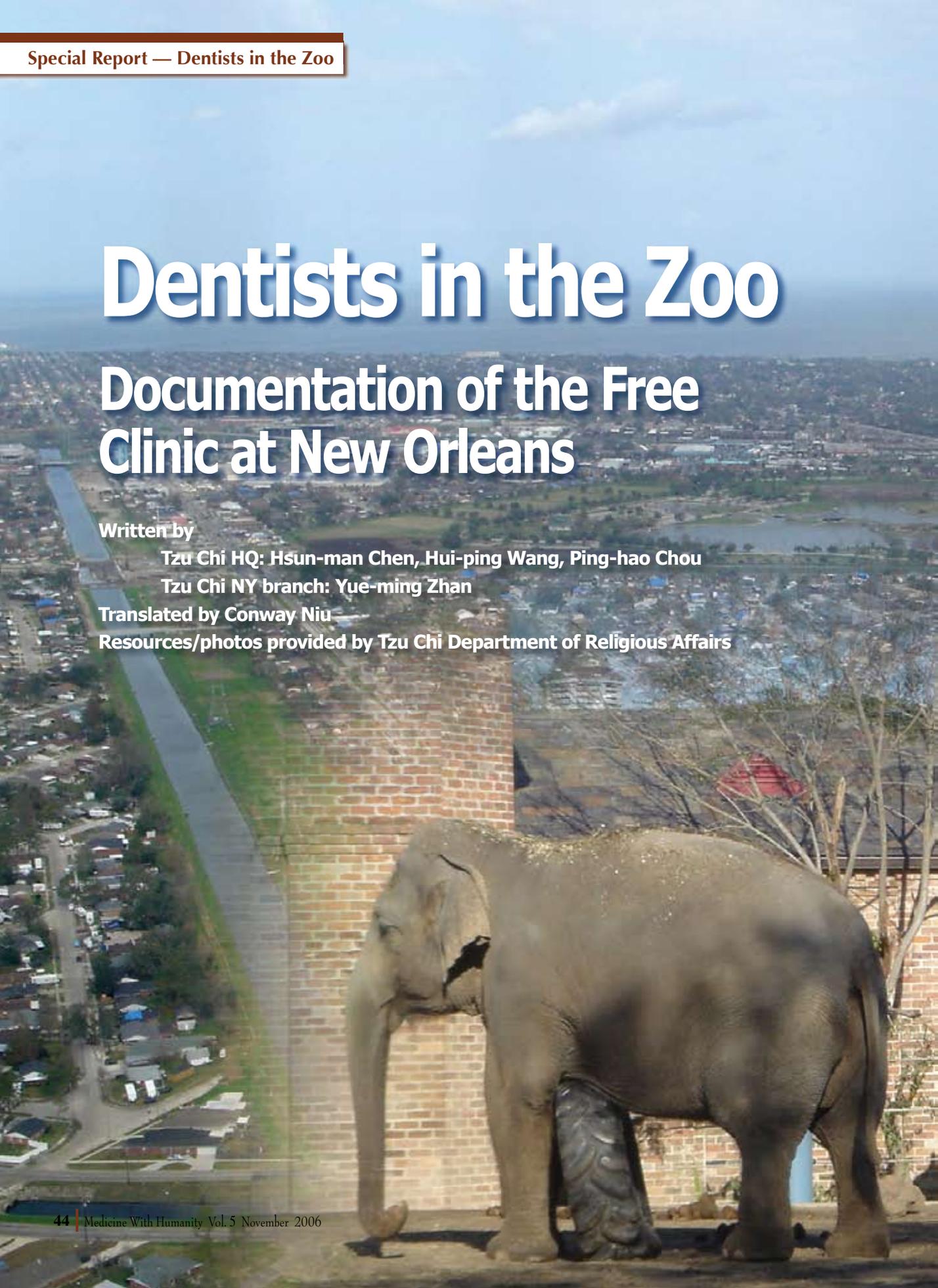
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In January 2006, the dentists of America received a letter from the American Dental Association asking for dentists to donate their time to provide free services in February to those affected by the devastating hurricane that has ravaged the city of New Orleans. To their surprise, soon afterwards, they received hundreds of replies, with all saying “yes!”

In fact, in August 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, members of the Tzu Chi Medical Association (TIMA) have often wondered when TIMA would provide a free clinic in New Orleans. Because of the chaos present at the time, along with transportation obstacles, the “Great Love Healing Car” could only provide services for a short amount of time in Texas. Also, due to medical regulations, physicians’ licenses are invalid outside of issued states, thus providing another obstacle to providing care in a foreign state. They sent in their applications for special approval, but in the meantime, TIMA members could only wait quietly.

This time, when TIMA’s physicians receive the invitation from American Dental Association, they immediately gathered quickly and spread the long-awaited information to their team members. Ultimately, more than ten dentists and thirty volunteers came together to help those in need at New Orleans.

The sponsor of this free clinic was RAM, Remote Area Medical Group. The clinic

lasted seven days, from February 6 until February 11. At the clinic, RAM provided dentists, internists, obstetricians, pediatrics, and optometrists. The dental portion of the clinic was headed by the Virginia Dental Association (VDA), and the TIMA dentists learned a great deal by working together with VDA dentists.

Zoo after Hurricane

After Hurricane Katrina hit, the victims faced a situation in which there were no physicians to visit. Beforehand, New Orleans had 50,000 beds in their hospitals, but after the disaster, only around 15,000 beds remained, due to the fact that many clinics and hospitals were destroyed by the hurricane. Therefore, many patients evacuated to other areas, and in addition, many physicians were forced to find other places to settle down. Another devastating blow to the situation was that unemployment was hindering the victims’ ability to afford proper medical care, leaving them only to pray for good health. The free clinic brought them hope, an answer to the victim’s prayers.

On February 5, seven New York brothers and sisters, and US Branch physician Dr. Chen Hsun Man converged from both coasts to New Orleans to set up equipment and to further understand the victims’ conditions. From Houston, the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic, with four brothers and sisters staffing

it, drove 650 miles to the Audubon Zoo of New Orleans. This miracle free clinic at the zoo was about to begin.

Waiting as an Essence of life

At 6:00am, on February 6, those waiting to be seen at the clinic had lined along several blocks. Around 10:00am, there were thousands of patients waiting already. Those arrived later than this time were asked to come back early the next day, sending them home with disappointment.

This “disaster of a century” took everything away from many of its victims.

Though the disaster had passed for six months already, its aftereffects are hard to accept, since the areas affected span such a large area, and so many people are in need of aid. According to the victims, the insurance companies are waiting for the federal government, and the federal government is waiting for the city government. The waiting continues on. Even today, half of the articles in the newspaper are related to the coping of Katrina victims. When volunteers apologized to the victims during the free clinic for the long wait, many answered that “waiting has become a major part of our lives.”



Patients waiting in the cold wind; with some arriving in the middle of the night, some driving for hours, just so they can see the doctor.

X-Rays of Love

Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic has a modern X-Ray device, so on the first day, the preliminary step of the clinic was to take x-rays of the patients' teeth. Drs. Lin Jun Yuan and Liao Jin Hsin were responsible for the x-raying, and at the same time, explaining the procedures to the patients, as well as introducing them to Tzu Chi.

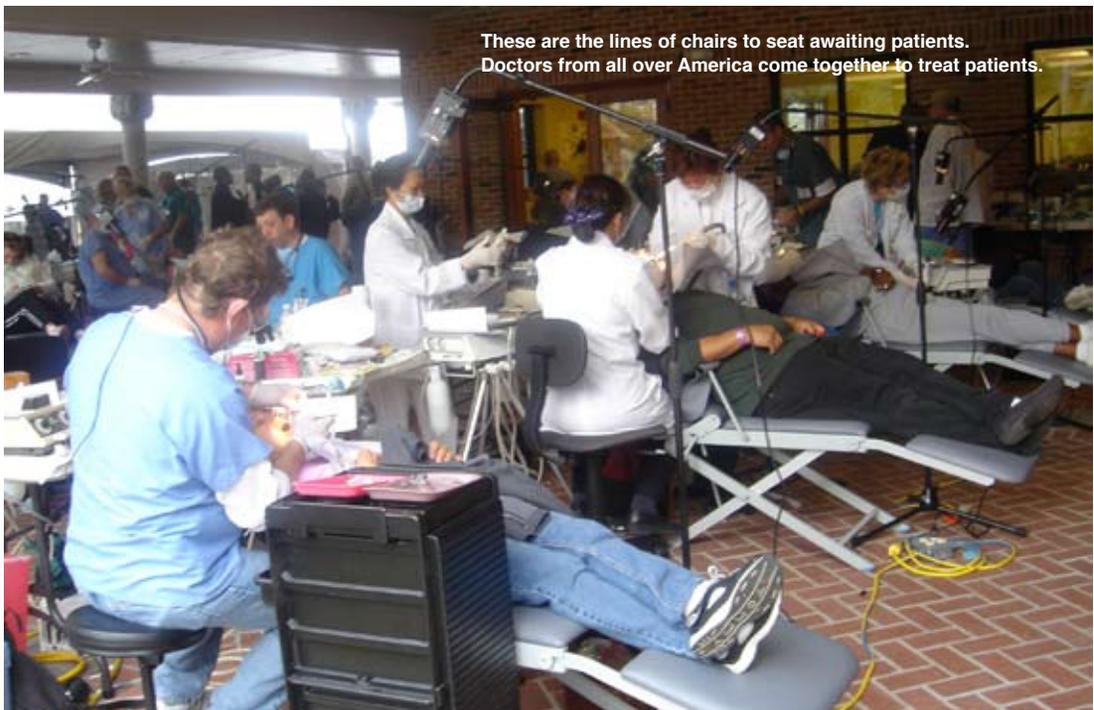
A Small World, a Joyous Meeting

On the first day, when Dr. Chen was in the clinic, someone tapped her on her shoulder.

This person turned out to be Thelma Nettles, a patient she had removed a tooth from at the 2005 free clinic there in Houston. This time, Thelma needed cavities filled. Thelma happily introduced her family to Tzu Chi, who had helped her before. Today, her family is back in New Orleans and safe, and expressed her gratitude towards everyone. She gratefully said, "with effort, all of this will pass."

Warm Hearts Spread Love in Cold Weather

The weather turned chilly in the usually



hot New Orleans on the second day of the free clinic. Almost subconsciously, the volunteers put on their jackets as they exited the bus facing the chilly air at the parking lot of the zoo. The outward appearance of the waiting crowd was different this time: they had jackets and were wrapped in warm blankets. Nevertheless, there were still many there early in the morning. “If we can see a doctor, it doesn’t matter how cold it is, we will wait,” said a lady in a wheelchair who had been waiting since 5:00am.

The medical team also had their challenges with the cold; because many of the patient examination areas were outdoors, the hands of the doctors stiffened as the wind blew. To solve this problem, plastic tarps and blankets were brought to the clinic ground to make it easier for both the patients and doctors. One patient expressed his gratitude: “it’s so touching to see you come so far and be so good us. We’ll never forget you.”

Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic Helps with Patients’ Problems



Patients who are short on clothing are blanketed by Tzu Chi volunteers. “I’m so touched. You come from so far away, and are so good to us. We’ll never forget you.” Patients put their gratitude in words.



TIMA members rotate shifts, allowing dentists to always have assistants, thus resulting in a more efficient and successful free clinic.

Dr. Honick, from New York State, found a patient with a disease of the mouth, who had previously thought that his wounds were from bad aim during shaving. Images of his head were taken before, but results were inconclusive, leading some to think that it may have been cancer of the mouth. Dr. Honick decided to use other machineries in the dental van, and through digital x-ray imaging, and the help of Dr. Liao Jin Hsin's questioning of the patient, they were able to conclude that this wound was actually a result of a car accident from 25 years ago.

Digital imaging was able to show that this wound was due to a fracture that caused the nerves connecting two teeth to deteriorate, and thus cause an infection. Dr. Liao accompanied the patient to his original doctor to get a better understanding of the patient's medical history, and later receive treatment under Dr. Honick. At 4:00pm that afternoon, Dr. Honick came to thank Tzu Chi's help in helping him find this case. When he returns to Tufts University, he will share this case with his dental students and dentists.

Mindful Contribution Becomes a Profession, Dental Assistants Abound

Number of dentists outnumbered the dental assistants, hence, many dentists have to multitask; they had to care for patients while operating the machinery. Some Tzu Chi volunteers attended Tzu Chi's Dental Assistant training class, and became much-demanded skills during the free clinic.

Even though these dental assistant volunteers had gone through some training, their experiences in a clinical setting were still insufficient. Only Sister Lee Hui Tseng was familiar with the process and had prior experience with these machineries. During those days, these dentists weren't only dentists, they were teachers as well. This group of amiable volunteers, originally afraid of making a mistake, stuck closely to their teachers. When they saw how busy the dentists become in multitasking, they came out of their fear in making mistakes and even more diligently assisted their teachers. The help they provided inspired great gratitude in their dentists. To the dentists, these volunteers not only brought down the level of anxiety in their working environments, but in their spirit as well.

The eldest of all the volunteers is named Serina, at age 79. She isn't a member of TIMA, but just a very warm-hearted retired teacher. Although she has no medical

knowledge, she still bought the air ticket and came to help. She spent many days in the dental clinic, asking whenever she didn't understand something. Once she understood, she did it, from sunrise to sunset. Her spirit touched all she encountered.

Who's Come to See the Show?

The location of this free clinic was at the Audubon Zoo, which appears to be a very peculiar spot for a free clinic. However, it turns out that city infrastructure of New Orleans had been so severely damaged that there was no open spaces to hold such an event, except for the zoo. It was also easy to access for the patients by bus.

Seeing the two Asian elephants walking in the zoo with their tires and oil barrels, they look as if they're ready and putting on a show. Next to the exhibition, signs are posted for show times, but today there isn't an audience like there usually is. The people who are there today are busy tending to the free clinic, leaving no one with time to watch the elephants' show.

A Rite of Passage by the Hurricane

The family of 18-year-old Tyrone was afraid of not being able to see a doctor began to wait in the parking lot at 1:30am with blankets. A sister asked him, "It's pitch black



Dr. Zhen-xi Liu and Wen-ru Lin performing a root canal procedure.

out, and you're alone in a parking lot. Aren't you afraid?" Tyrone replied, "No, compared to the four days I spent at the Superdome, this is nothing."

The young Tyrone began to retell his story of his ten-member family going to the Superdome with only the clothes on their backs. With tens of thousands of people there eating, sleeping, and defecating there, the once luxurious football stadium had turned into a hell-like place. After hearing of people being raped and robbed in there, the family chose to leave the stadium and wait in the street.

The four days were traumatic for the family, with those awake protecting those asleep. They were lucky enough to be sent to Houston, where they were given a hotel room and later an apartment. Only three months later did Tyrone decide to return to New Orleans with his aunt to start anew.

Upon their return, because so many houses were being remodeled Tyrone was able to use his painting skills to earn some money. "I want to go back to school and learn a trade. I don't want to be immature like before, doing drugs, just wandering aimlessly everyday. After experiencing



Lots of dentists in the States devoted their time to provide free services for Katrina hurricane victims.

Katrina, I have learned a lot. There were too many people who I saw die of sickness and drowning. Life is too short, I can't waste anymore time." To an 18-year old, Hurricane Katrina brought him a valuable lesson.

Media Publicizes, More Patients Come

On the fourth day of the free clinic, after news reports of the clinic, more people came

to the already crowded free clinic. Many patients drove two or three hours to come here, and from this the dire need of the patients can be seen.

"Love can heal the hurt, love can balance pain." This phrase fairly represents this free clinic. TIMA's 30-some members were only one of the many groups that helped, with volunteers from Seattle to Boston. Some came by themselves, others came as group. There were even doctors who brought their

own tents to live at the zoo during the clinic, showing a true sign of their caring.

Participate in the Free Clinic and Experience History First Hand

Dr. Guo-jian Rong, of Tzu Chi New York branch, a longtime participant of TIMA's free clinics, came to the New Orleans on the 10th with his daughter, who is a senior in high school. To participate in the free clinic, Dr.

Rong rearranged his patients' appointments, and his patients were glad to do so. What was even more special was that his daughter took off from school to participate in this free clinic. Dr. Rong states that though her classes are important, she can also learn a lot from helping hurricane victims, and that it was a worthy reason for taking an absence from school. His daughter, who is visiting New Orleans for the first time, is also thankful to her father for giving her this first-



TIMA's mobile free clinic bus equipped perfectly helped dentists in the zoo to have precise diagnosis.

hand experience which cannot be learned from textbooks.

At the free clinic, there was also Dr. Jianchuan Chen from Los Angeles. Dr. Chen is also an experienced Tzu Chi commissioner. He was responsible for root canal procedures, which take much time and effort. Due to equipment shortage, it was even more of a challenge for Dr. Chen. During one day, he treated four patients, with each taking up to two hours. Even though his eyes have become tired and hands become numb, he still serves his patients.

Witness Hurricane Aftereffects

Most brothers and sisters know about Katrina through the media. However, it is different to see it first-hand during free clinics and in aid distribution. Six volunteers from Texas went to Mississippi's Pass Christian to distribute aid. Sunken highways, uprooted trees, and cars tangled in branches – is this the America that is the envy of the world? From seeing these scenes, volunteers recall some words from Master Cheng Yen: “The earth is our mother.” Humans must protect her.

Texas Team Came In Niche of Time

The brothers and sisters from Texas were happy to know the scale of the free clinic had grown so large, and decided to go to New Orleans to help with the free clinic. They arrived just in the niche of time. Reason being, the east coast was forecasted to be hit by a blizzard, the east coast volunteers had to leave early, these Texan volunteers arrived just to fill in the empty spaces. Some cleaned the environment, while others helped in the developing of X-ray images. From registration to making name tags, these volunteers gave selflessly for the success of the clinic.

The five day clinic successfully came to an end on February 21st, and brought together the love of doctors from around the country, serving over 11,000 victims. From this peculiar free clinic at the zoo, Tzu Chi volunteers and doctors are grateful for the opportunity for them to cooperate and provide this service, not only witnessing the warmth of mankind, but also experiencing the sincere joys of the world. 