

Seafaring, world travelling dentist serves the underserved on small islands

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Federated States of Micronesia—For ten years Dr. Michael Leppert, a retired dentist from Germany has been offering emergency dental services to small islands that are underserved or not served at all as he circumnavigates the world.

After he sold his successful dental practice in Germany and retired, he took to the seas aboard his beautiful 16 meter long, 86 meter wide sailing vessel—a catamaran, the “Mariposa”. “There are only so many beautiful beaches with palm trees you can see,” he said. Along with seeing those beautiful islands, he has also set up a free dental practice aboard his boat. Each year he sees anywhere from 1000 to 2000 patients who might not otherwise see a dentist due to accessibility issues. He pays for it all himself—about \$25,000 a year. He says he receives no government support for his services though his website does provide a means of offering financial support that he hopes some people will be attracted to.

His website, www.cat-mariposa.com is produced in German but there is a tab for English speakers. It has excellent photos from most of his visits throughout the world and also a means for people to donate to his efforts, though he says that has not set up a tax deductible foundation.

The “Mariposa” is impressive with solar and wind provided power and a large supply of big batteries for power. He also has a fossil fueled backup generator, but Dr. Leppert said he rarely needs to use it unless there’s no wind and no sun for a long period of time. His dental practice is fully equipped with a high speed dental drill, sterilizing units, an X-Ray machine,

and everything else he needs to help patients with their dentistry needs up to and including surgeries. He can also help with diving accidents. He provides all of his services aboard the “Mariposa”.

It’s sometimes challenging. When he was in Pingelap, the harbor was too deep to anchor so he had to drift while he served the people there. Patients came to his boat on their own smaller boats and waited in his “waiting room”—the bow of his boat—until it was their turn. When he was getting close to serving the last patient he would sound the horn and the people of Pingelap would send the next boat load of patients out.

He gave us photos of one dental surgery and reconstruction that he performed in Pingelap aboard the “Mariposa” that was nothing short of astounding. The patients teeth were so badly rotted they were all but gone. During two visits in Pingelap, Dr. Leppert was able to reconstruct the teeth.

Dr. Leppert has more energy than most men his age usually have and passionately uses that energy to serve people and to deliver a message about the importance of good dental hygiene as a vital matter of health. “Bacteria from the teeth go straight to the heart” he says. He claims oral hygiene is one of the biggest unnecessary killers and he spends a good deal of his time teaching young people how to properly clean their teeth. He even provides supplies, paid for out of his own pocket so they can begin to do so.

He says that lemon and sugar can

also maintain oral hygiene as long as they are followed by a thorough rinse. The acid in the lemon eats the bacteria that collects on teeth.

He does not compete with dentists who have practices in the larger islands but he has donated his time to clinics if they are willing. He donated his time to the Kosrae Dental clinic at their hospital which he says seems to suffer from a severe lack of budget that effects the services they are able to offer. He also donated his time to the Pohnpei Dental Clinic at the Pohnpei State Hospital. He was surprised at the facilities and named them as the third best equipped dental facility among small islands in the Pacific that he has seen, and he has seen plenty.

From the top of his head he quoted a list of places that he has visited and practiced which included the islands of the Mediterranean, the Canary Islands, the Caribbean, Panama, French Polynesia, Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand, Tuvalu, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and the Marshall Islands.

This is his first trip to Micronesia. So far he has seen patients in Pingelap, Mwokilloa, and Kosrae. He had to make some repairs and has been in Pohnpei for several months now. Before continuing on his journey, he will fly to Thailand for medical treatment for a heart concern he said he knew was coming. After he returns in a couple of weeks, he will be heading to the outer islands of Chuuk, Yap,



BEFORE



AFTER

and Palau.

Dr. Leppert has another message when he travels. “It’s never too late to start”. He didn’t even begin his medical training until he was 32 and that was after he had already been trained as an electrical and mechanical engineer. He has captained large ships. He is a master welder as evidenced by his beautiful stainless steel work aboard his vessel. He knows his way around a circuit board and still, at whatever ageless age he is, climbs his nearly 80 foot mast for repairs.

He finished his medical training in his late 30’s and built a large dental practice in Germany that, at the time he sold his business, employed six dentists and 40 other people. They opened at 8:00 in the morning and stayed open until 11:00 each night.

Now he is able to give his services to people who can’t afford to pay but who desperately need it and might not get it otherwise.

“Tell them it’s never too late to start,” he said during our interview. “If I can do it, anyone can. Never give up!”

