The earthquake in Haiti has left little of what had been an already poor health-care and dental health-care system. Even prior to the earthquake, medical and dental assistance was often only provided through the aid of international volunteers. Dr Gary Godley and his son Lance are two practicing dentists from Naples in Florida who decided to leave their country and bring much needed dental care to people in Haiti. DTI Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann had the opportunity to speak with them about their experiences on a dental mission in 2009 and the state of dentistry in Haiti prior to the earthquake.

Drs Godley, you recently participated in a dental mission to Haiti. How did you become involved with the programme and for how long did you stay in the country?

Dr Gary Godley: In May 2009, Lance and I travelled with another dentist Dr Garth McCaffrey and pilot Bill Earls to Haiti. We were sponsored by Hope For Haiti, an organisation founded by JoAnne Kuehner. Since then, Hope For Haiti has provided aid prior to the quake. Luckily, we were hampered by a lack of supplies and loss of dental instruments prior to our arrival. Thanks to a Haitian dentist who loaned us some rudimentary instruments, we were able to provide surgical treatment to the most needy of patients.

What were the main objectives of the programme and were they fulfilled?

Dr Gary Godley: The primary purpose of this mission was to assess the situation and need for dental care. Certainly, the need was very present and the facility at which we treated the patients was a medical clinic renovated by Hope For Haiti and staffed by a medical doctor who was trained in Cuba. The patients were most appreciative but many were very ill and required treatment beyond the scope of our ability and resources.

What were your first thoughts when you saw photographs of the recent destruction in Haiti?

Dr Gary Godley: I was devastated and immediately wanted to return to Haiti. My main concern was how people who have so little could survive the loss of their loved ones, the increase in unsanitary conditions, the rampant spread of disease and the loss of so many volunteers who had provided so much and prior to the quake. Luckily, the world has responded in a manner that is nothing short of a miracle.

My thoughts about Haiti prior to the devastating earthquake were about the lack of food, water, sanitation, adequate housing, medical personnel and high rate of infant mortality (20 per cent of children die before five years of age). Many children eat mud-cookies to satisfy their hunger and are very malnourished. Abject poverty in Haiti is poverty unknown to most Americans and other people of the world. The population is unsustainable without the aid of other countries and their volunteers. The mountains are denuded and the rivers are troughs of mud. Having said this, I found the country to have a natural beauty and a proud and spirited population.

Dr Lance Godley: My thoughts after the tragic earthquake were about the survival and basic necessities of the people of Haiti. This population had so little to begin with in the form of basic necessities, such as clean water, sewage disposal and basic government. That this earthquake probably has destroyed
what little they had in the form of these things. Hopefully the world will help Haiti not just rebuild what they had, but help them to achieve something much better. The people that we met during our time in Haiti were remarkable. And I’m sure with the right tools and systems established they could achieve much.

Who provided dental treatment in Haiti before the earthquake struck? Which dental conditions are treated by the dentists there?

Dr Gary Godley: Most dentistry is provided by volunteers from around the world. There are many organisations that provide dentists, hygienists and assistants and other personnel. Although basic restorative dentistry is provided, treatment consists mainly of oral surgery procedures, as well as the treatment of pain and infections.

Are there any dental schools? Where do dentists receive their education?

Dr Gary Godley: This is a question we asked and never received a definite answer. To the best of my knowledge, there is University of Haiti School of Dentistry in Port-Au-Prince associated with a hospital. I understand there are perhaps 15 students enrolled. Does this school exist after the earthquake? I do not know.

Dr Lance Godley: We learned that some Haitians leave and are trained abroad and return to aid their fellow countrymen.

According to the WHO, there are less than 100 dentists for a population of over 9 million. How do people receive treatment at all?

Dr Gary Godley: Of course, many people never receive dental treatment. However, there are many volunteer dentists who return many times during their career to help provide an invaluable service to those they are able to reach. Travel within Haiti can be very difficult for both the dental personnel and patients, which limits care for a vast number of people.

Dental Tribune International, in collaboration with the Latin America Dental Federation and the World Dental Federation, is currently organising a congress to help raise money for rebuilding practices in Haiti. Have you heard of any other initiatives?

Dr Gary Godley: Certainly, there is still much aid being sent to Haiti. The American Dental Association, for example, is collaborating with a number of dental and non-dental non-governmental organisations such as International Medical Relief and Flying Doctors of America that work in Haiti to respond to the disaster with both short-term assistance and long-term recovery plans to help rebuild dental infrastructure there. If you want to donate just go to their website www.adafoundation.org. There, you will also find updates on the disaster-response efforts.

Are you planning to go back to the country soon?

Dr Gary Godley: We had planned a return trip in December 2009, which was cancelled for unknown reasons. Hopefully, the mission will be rescheduled once the current problems are under control. I also volunteer with the East Meets West Foundation (Oakland, California) and make an annual mission trip to Vietnam. This has been my primary objective for several years, but now that I am aware of the great need closer to home, I will certainly avail myself as needed.

Thank you very much for the interview.