

Caring for Bosnian Children

Editorial Staff

Few countries have experienced more strife and civil unrest in the past decade than Bosnia. From the time it was first recognized as an independent country in 1992, until a peace agreement was signed between warring Serbians, Croats and Muslims in 1995, tens of thousands of Bosnians on all sides were systematically beaten and killed, their valuables stolen and their property destroyed, simply because they belonged to a different ethnic group. As a result, thousands of Bosnian children are now hungry and homeless, with neither parents nor siblings to care for them.

This August, J. Aaron Wolfe, DC, of Frankfort, Illinois, volunteered his time to go to Bosnia as part of Care for Children, an organization which helps the refugees on a continuing basis. He traveled to Medjugorje,¹ a small mountain village of approximately 3,500, to provide chiropractic care for both children and adults. He was accompanied by two pediatric dentists, Drs. Richard Cahill and Janice Lubas of Oak Lawn, Illinois, and Connie Tannura, a dental hygienist.

Dr. Wolfe's trip involved a 12-hour plane trip from the U.S. to Bosnia, followed by a three-hour bus ride to reach the orphanages in the area. Once he arrived in Medjugorje, Dr. Wolfe began the week-long task of providing supplies, chiropractic evaluation and care, and neuromuscular rehabilitation where necessary.

Before he could begin working with the children, however, Dr. Wolfe had to gain their trust. Almost none of his pediatric patients spoke English, and many had suffered the trauma of witnessing other members of their families die. And because very few of them had received sufficient human interaction and stimulation as infants, the growth rate of the Bosnian children was slower than normal. Many children were unable to hold up their heads, sit up or crawl at the appropriate age.

One of the saddest conditions that appeared in nearly every child Dr. Wolfe saw was tooth decay. Drinking water in Bosnia is not fluoridated. The lack of fluoride combined with substandard living conditions and no regular dental care meant that most children were already suffering from severe dental problems. "The necessity for dentists, doctors and chiropractors there is overwhelming," Dr. Wolfe said.

Eventually, the children began to understand that Dr. Wolfe was there to provide help, not cause harm. Before long the children trusted him and, with the help of interpreters, allowed him to treat them. The children invited Dr. Wolfe to play soccer with them during the afternoon. "They're just regular kids," he said. "We had a lot of fun together."

In addition to providing chiropractic adjustments and rehabilitation to the children, Dr. Wolfe worked with several adoptive caregivers at the orphanages on how to provide care for infant refugees. He showed the workers how to perform massages and demonstrated exercises and posture training that would strengthen the musculoskeletal development of the infants.

By the time he left Bosnia, Dr. Wolfe and the rest of the Care for Children team had helped treat dozens of children and infants. While his contribution to the care of these children was significant, he knows that there is still plenty of work to be done.

"Chiropractic physicians are desperately needed in this part of the world," Dr. Wolfe said. "I encourage my professional colleagues to give a week or two of their time to assist with this true humanitarian effort.

"Based on my own experience, I know that they will receive real personal gratification as they provide much needed health care to the orphans and refugees there. If each of us could reach out to help even one of these innocent children, the effort would be overwhelmingly successful."

1. Nestled between the mountains in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina, the small village of Medjugorje has become a beacon for visitors, as reported "apparitions of the Blessed Mother" have been taking place since June 24, 1981.

Editor's note: If you're interested in getting involved in Care For Children, please contact Connie Tannura at (708) 424-1300.

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