

Getting to the root of the problem

Cottingham dentist Chris Branfield is a specialist in the sort of work that changes people's lives. But a charitable trip to treat Moroccan children proved a life-changing experience for him, as LUCY LYON finds out . . .

In the clean, bright Cottingham surgery from which he usually works, Chris Branfield is used to carrying out the sort of dentistry that transforms lives. Whether it is dental implants that mean people can eat properly again or cosmetic work that raises self-esteem, Chris knows his skill makes a difference to people's lives.

But the work he recently carried out with basic equipment in a makeshift surgery in a classroom in a remote school in north-east Morocco reminded him just how transformative his work could be.

For the 50 children he treated in one single day, in the remote fishing village of El Jabah, were not hoping to eat ice-cream without wincing or dazzle people with their pearly whites, they were hoping for an end to the constant pain of living with a mouthful of disease and decay.

The four-day journey to El Jabah, which nestles at the foot of the Rif Mountains, was always going to be a challenge and, when dad-of-two Chris agreed to take part in the trip, he was not sure what to expect.

As one of four UK dentists to make the trip, 40-year-old Chris realised the journey, which at one point required them to traverse along a foot-wide mountain trail to reach their remote destination, was going to be demanding.

But although he was aware that the region's Berber tribe – who have just one doctor for 50,000 people and no dentist – would have dental problems, he was not prepared for the scale of the decay and disease that lay before him.

Chris explained: "I was absolutely taken aback by the magnitude and severity of the dental problems.

"I have not seen decay like it here for years. It was like taking a step back in time.

"I only saw it up close on the children.

"But you didn't have to be a dentist to see the people walking around with missing teeth and big black holes."

Working alongside a charitable contingent of Moroccan dentists, the team split up into three groups – to work on education, assessment and extraction.

Throughout the day, Chris, who was working on the extractions, removed 200 rotten teeth from 50 children. One girl alone had ten teeth extracted and will need many more taking out at a later date.

Chris explained: "Some of the children's teeth were so decayed there were just roots left in the gums, which had to be removed.

"They were obviously wary and we had to work hard to overcome the language barrier and explain what we were trying to do and that we were trying to help.

"We found the way with a little broken



Some of the children Chris helped on his trip

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Cottingham dentist Chris Branfield went to Morocco with a charity group called Dental Mavericks to provide vital dental work. In one day alone, Chris removed 200 rotten teeth from 50 children in the remote fishing village of El Jabah

PICTURE: Jack Harland

French, a little Marcel Marceau and a lot of TLC. Eventually, we had kids laughing and smiling even after they had their teeth out, at times. It was exhausting but so rewarding – I get emotional just thinking about it."

Although it was physically demanding and emotionally draining, the experience has fired up Chris and the rest of the UK-based team to develop their charitable work further.

Calling themselves the Dental Mavericks, the group are already planning a return trip next year and want to set up a dental education programme to tackle the problem head-on.

On this trip, the team handed out toothbrushes and toothpaste to the children and also left puppets to educate the children about the importance of taking care of their teeth, but Chris is hoping to raise funds for a dental nurse to make a weekly trip to advise the children and monitor dental problems.

Chris, who is the principal dentist at Castle Park Dental Care in Cottingham, explained: "We asked the kids if they owned a toothbrush and about 20 per cent said they did but whether they used it, we don't know – it didn't seem like it.

"The key to the problem is education: Start by trying to help these children and then hopefully the next generation as well."

While in El Jabah, the team met with a minister from the Moroccan government, who promised to help with the red tape involved in any further trips. The Dental Mavericks hope this is the beginning of a long and successful relationship, which could transform the lives of the children not just at the school they visited but at other remote spots.

Chris said: "In this country, you always have access to dentistry in one way, shape or form, so if you need help it is there. Some of these children are living with abscesses and constant pain and that is hard to think about.

"We helped about 50 children, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. We really want to develop this and make a difference."

■ Dental Mavericks is a self-funded non-profit organisation. For more information on helping the team make a difference to the lives of the Berber children, visit www.castleparkdental.co.uk