In August 2018, a team of 7 BDS students (2 now BDS 5th year and 5 BDS 6th year) spent two weeks of their 1-month vacation on voluntary dental service in villages and schools in Uganda. The project was organized with joint effort of several registered dentists from Hong Kong, the HKU Faculty of Dentistry and a NGO, Watoto Asia. Besides the dental students, the team included 6 registered dentists from Hong Kong, a qualified dental hygienist, and 2 secondary school students. The team brought along many consumables, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and dental instruments and restorative materials to provide oral health education, clinical examinations and simple treatments. Indeed, this was the 5th consecutive year whereby a team of HK dentists (composition varied from year to year) visited that country. They obtained temporary registration to allow themselves to practise in Uganda and to supervise the students when required.

The dental service provided by the outreach team ranged from oral health education to check-ups and emergency care. The participants first listened to a talk on tooth brushing, caries prevention, advice on dietary habit and trauma management. Posters and tooth models were prepared to overcome the language barrier. Each participant was given a set of a toothbrush and toothpaste. Then they were screened for dental treatment needs. Some cases were treated with topical fluoride varnish or silver diamine fluoride; while some others would receive restorations or extractions, depending on the symptoms and "restorability" of the carious lesion. The team, even, provided some root canal treatment for a small number of suitable individuals. For all attendees, our aim was to relieve any major symptoms and, where possible, halt the progression of existing caries. The number of patients grew every day – up to 500 patients were screened and over a hundred received some treatments in each location we visited. Due to the limited time and resources, our outreach team did not manage to provide comprehensive treatment, but rather was addressing the chief complaint, leaving some cases to be followed up by a local dentist who periodically attends the village clinic.

The outreach service took place in Gulu, a city-village in northern Uganda, close to the border with Rwanda, some 320 km from the capital city. The dental service there was very inadequate and inaccessible. Not only that, the local population in the village is generally poor and not able to afford dental treatments. Watoto Asia is an overseas extension of a local NGO, Watoto Church, which runs home for the widows and orphans. With that background, the team first targeted widows and children affiliated to and under the care of Watoto, aiming to improve their general oral health knowledge and to address their chief complaints. Throughout the 6 working days of dental service, the team visited and rendered service at various locations nearby and some rather rural locations, including the Watoto neighbourhood centre, some primary and secondary schools, a local Christian church and a children’s village. There were other cultural exchange activities and a visit to the dental school in the capital, Kampala.
To some participants, the simple treatment had solved a long nagging dental problem. To many others, this may be their first encounter with a dentist or being properly taught on oral hygiene. “While I was giving oral hygiene instruction to the women in the neighbourhood centre, I was shocked to hear a common practice they have. When their babies’ first two primary teeth erupted, they would remove them with crude instruments without local anaesthesia, as they feared that the (normal) signs of teething like fever and unrest were signs of infection and disease. The local people use chewed plant stems as toothbrushes. It showed that their oral health knowledge is really lacking and a lot of healthcare education needs to be done,” Catherine Lee, a BDS student from class of 2019, recalled her experience in Uganda.

Despite having language barrier, the team put in their greatest effort to offer as much help as possible. The responses to the service were positive and very encouraging. “There was always a communication problem between our team and local patients as they could not express their chief complaint or problem… Thus, we could only decide on the treatment needs based on our clinical observations… Some patients could not stand the pressure (and fear) of the possibility of needing an extraction and simply refused any treatments. Although most of the children struggled or cried during the treatment, many of them held our hands afterwards to show their thankfulness for what we did for them,” says Cheryl Chan, a volunteer from BDS class of 2019.

The volunteering experience was thought-provoking to the dental students. They were grateful for being born in the blessed city of Hong Kong, where medical and dental healthcare is readily available and affordable. Compared to the Ugandan students who had to travel on foot for 2-3 hours each day to go to school, and have no lights (no electricity) in the crowded classroom, Hong Kong students were blessed with a comfortable learning environment and the many more learning opportunities. This outreach experience has inspired all students to re-evaluate and learn to appreciate and cherish everything they have.

The team’s stay in Uganda might have been short, but the impact to the locals, as well as our student participants, was strong and long lasting. It is hoped that the message to the local community would have created a ripple effect, and be enhanced by the growing number of volunteers joining this rewarding journey. The dentists are welcome to join this meaningful adventure that, hopefully, will continue in summer after summer.