

Dentist bringing smiles to Africa

BY LEE BROOKS

ERIK Ahlbom of Port Erin Dental Surgery recently completed a two-and-a-half-week tour of charitable work in Uganda.

Mr Ahlbom, 53, was part of a dental outreach team organised by Christian Relief Uganda (CRU) reaching people in remote areas that otherwise would get no treatment at all.

Of the task that greeted him, Erik said: 'The health situation in Uganda is dire. Large proportions of the population live in poverty or extreme poverty. Malnourishment is a huge issue, HIV and AIDS have left entire villages abandoned, sanitation and access to clean water are poor and health care is anything from basic to non-existent.'

From a dental point of view, this means untreated conditions can have severe consequences: 'Noma is such a condition', explained Mr Ahlbom, 'it is an infectious disease that starts in the gum and, if untreated, breaks down the tissues of the face, ultimately killing the victim in most cases. Those who survive are severely disfigured.'

The typical Ugandan diet does not include as many sugary 'junk' foods and drinks meaning tooth cavities are not especially common, but the limited access to health services meant Mr Ahlbom's team were dealing with neglected infections.

The mobile surgery was manned by volunteers and could be set up in almost any environment without



HELPING HANDS: Erik Ahlbom with a dental patient in Uganda. Inset - Erik Ahlbom of Port Erin Dental Surgery

compromising surgical hygiene. The triage nurses would filter the 100 worst cases from the crowd for treatment. As patients would only be seen once, removing teeth was invariably their best chance of being rid of infection.

For many Ugandans the only medical option is the advice of traditional healers. Mr Ahlbom reported seeing cases of 'Infant Oral Mutilation', a problem where an attempt is made to dig out infection from the gums, sometimes using instruments as crude as

nails or bicycle spokes. The implications include risk of septicemia, hepatitis and HIV infection. An emphasis of the CRU is training local dentists, and they work closely with Makerere University in Kampala. Erik's team of four dentists included two Ugandans who are continuing the work.

Mr Ahlbom, originally from Sweden, thanked the staff at Port Erin Dental Surgery for their 'heroic' effort in keeping the clinic running in his absence.

The team in Port Erin is planning to

send staff on a new Ugandan mission in 2012. Fundraising will start later this year. Anyone wishing to assist can contact the surgery on 833667. Erik assures anyone that donations to the CRU make a direct difference: 'We don't send money, we send experts.'

'To see malnourished and suffering humans on TV is upsetting. When you stand face to face with the misery and smell it and feel it and try and work in it, you will never again be able to tell yourself it is not your problem.'