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### **A Mission of Mercy**

A few weeks ago a tremendous outpouring of love and compassion was shown in our community that affected thousands of people. Working in the affluent area of East Cobb, it is not often that I see in my dental practice severe, rampant dental decay. Oral hygiene awareness and prevention of dental disease seems to be fairly important to my patients. However, there are many people living among us who do not have the same dental awareness or finances available to prevent and treat their dental diseases.

Friday, August 12, and Saturday, August 13, 2011, the first Georgia Mission of Mercy was held at the First Baptist Church of Woodstock. Over 1500 volunteers including licensed Georgia dentists, hygienists, dental office employees and caring community members signed up to offer dental education, exams and treatment to low- or no-income Georgians who cannot pay for care. I was amazed at what the Georgia Dental Association and partnering companies were able to put together so quickly. The inside of the church was unrecognizable after over 100 dental chairs, several panoramic x-ray units, a dental laboratory, and a huge sterilization center were set up in the building. Doors opened at 5 a.m. both days with patients being seen on a first come, first served basis. We had no idea how many people would show up seeking treatment.

On the first day, over 4000 people, many of whom had camped out overnight in the parking lot, were lined up outside the church eager to see a dentist. I saw patients with their coolers, chairs, and strollers with small children standing in a line 20 football fields long that wrapped around the building and through the parking lot. Half of those hopeful potential patients had to be turned away.

The goal of the GA M.O.M. was to:

- Provide free access to dental care for 2,000 low- and no-income adults while placing a high priority on patients suffering from dental infections or pain.
- Educate patients and family members in attendance about the importance of obtaining and maintaining optimal oral health.
- Raise awareness of the increasing difficulty low-income Georgia adults face in accessing critical dental care.
- Challenge patients, policymakers, and dental professionals to work together to improve the oral health of those who have been promised care by the state.

The hearts of all of us who volunteered were touched by the gratitude of the people who were so thankful for any treatment they received. Some came with only a few remaining badly decayed and loose teeth and were provided with extractions and dentures. Others had a mouth full of cavities, and because of the huge number of patients hoping for care, only the most severe dental issues of each patient could be addressed. Every patient received oral hygiene education and was encouraged to seek further dental care. I am thankful to be part of a profession and community that feel led to share their talents and abilities in caring for our neighbors. My staff and I look forward to the next GA Mission of Mercy where we will again see God at work in the hearts of our community members.