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Doing The Right Thing

Article by: Ray Weiss // Living Section 1E

Timmy the Tooth is a matinee-idol molar in a children's video series who always polishes off his arch rival, the Cavity Goon.

Timmy's sort of a dental crusader. My two preschoolers love the act, even if they sometimes miss the message.

Still, like other Americans, they have a huge advantage growing up in a country where brushing, flossing and cutting back on sweets are as much a part of kid's education as reading, writing and arithmetic.

Marvin Fier, a 53-year-old Pomona dentist, knows that's not the case in other

countries. During the last three years, he has visited Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Peru, bringing along his knowledge and enthusiasm for improving smiles.

"I'm trying to help elevate the level of dental care through education, ultimately improving health and the quality of life," he says.

Fier, a member of the Academy of Dentistry International, is just back from Costa Rica, where as

the keynote speaker at a two-day convention, he addressed 300 dentists. Many of them must deal with antiquated equipment and procedures in a Central American country that has great beaches, but lousy dental care.

"On the streets I saw a lot of young people with missing teeth. There's serious tooth decay," he says. "There's usually no money to do a root canal

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and cap, so they get pulled. The conditions are terrible."

There are dental colleges, but no license is required after graduation to practice. And there's no agency to weed out the hacks.

"They have to spend one year in a clinical setting," Fier says of aspiring Costa Rican dentists. "After that they can hang out a shingle and they're there."

Generally, the caliber of dental care in Costa Rica's cities is better than that in the country. But

Fier says only about two in 10 dentists make a decent living because so many people are poor, unable to afford even the simplest procedure.

Dental care ends up being a luxury for the wealthy and a low priority for the poor, resulting in a "if-it-hurts-pull-it" mentality among many dentists and patients.

That's why Fier makes his periodic dental crusades around the world.

"It's sort of like there's no middle class in a lot of places," he says. "I feel like I'm giving something back to my profession. It's gratifying. I feel like I'm making a difference somewhere."

In Costa Rica, Fier talked about modern techniques for filling cavities and using bridges and dentures. In other countries, he has done procedures on patients, as local dentists looked on.

"They are extremely thankful to receive the information," Fier says. "But how it translates into everyday life, I don't know. it's hard to measure."

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