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A planet of smiles

Helping children has been a part of this dentist's repertoire since elementary school

As a child growing up in Mexico City, Dr. Sandra Fastlicht was fascinated with teeth, thanks in large part to her father, orthodontist Jorge Fastlicht, who gave his 10-year-old daughter an office uniform and allocated her cleaning jobs in his clinic. Not only did the young-

too. But Fastlicht's ambitions soon went beyond hygiene lectures, and she began undertaking dental examinations in the school bathroom. Her fellow students were losing their baby teeth and would ask her to help them get rid of the wobbly annoyances. Fastlicht happily obliged.

degree in orthodontics before joining her father's practice. But Mexico City's severe air pollution affected Fastlicht's children's health, so she and her family moved to Canada. They settled in Vancouver, and Fastlicht took a full-time position as clinical associate professor of orthodontics at the University of British Columbia Faculty of Dentistry, as well as working in private practice.

Then, in 2011, following a 12-year teaching stint, Fastlicht left UBC to undertake an Orthodontic Fellowship in Cleft Lip and Palate and other Craniofacial Anomalies at the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto. SickKids' cleft lip and palate program is one of the oldest and most comprehensive in the world, with a team of medical experts ranging from orthodontists to plastic surgeons, speech therapists to social workers, audiologists to dentists. (The centre treats children from other countries as well as Canadians.) As the team's fellow in orthodontics, Fastlicht would insert devices inside a two-week-old baby's mouth to bring the cleft segments and lips together and facilitate feeding. This helped to remodel the mouth, lips and nostril, preparing the infant for the first of many surgeries, says Fastlicht. "Each baby I held in my arms was like my baby," she says. "I knew that these children were the children I wanted to treat and help."

Then, the Canadian charity Transforming Faces, which works closely with SickKids, asked Fastlicht to attend a Cleft Lip and Palate conference in Peru. She would be part of a SickKids' team that would lecture to the Spanish-speaking attendees about the different stages of orthodontic treatment in cleft lip and palate patients. For Fastlicht, it was the start of an international teaching career with Transforming Faces, whose mandate is to bring quality care to children with cleft lip and palate in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Eventually, Transforming Faces hired her to train medical professionals in Chile, Peru, Argentina and she travelled



Dr. Sandra Fastlicht treats an infant patient in Vietnam, alongside her Planet Smile support team

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ster undertake menial clean-up but she also learned about hygiene, thanks to the clinic's giant denture model and oversized toothbrush, which her father used to teach young patients oral care.

Excited to share her newfound knowledge, Fastlicht would take the denture model and giant toothbrush into the classroom and instruct her fellow students on proper brushing techniques during show-and-tell. She was soon invited to give her presentation in other classes,

Gripping the offending tooth tightly with toilet paper, she would twist, deftly extracting it. Word spread and Fastlicht became the unofficial school dentist. Eventually the principal found out and kiboshed any further procedures. "I closed 'shop,'" Fastlicht says with a chuckle. "But my father really enjoyed knowing I was a little dentist at school."

Fastlicht went on to attend dental school in Mexico City, a postgraduate orthodontic specialty and a master's



*Making a
difference,
one smile
at a time*

Dr. Fastlicht started her own organization, Planet Smile for Kids, to develop comprehensive and sustainable cleft lip and palate programs in Mexico and Vietnam

as a consultant to such southeast Asian countries as Vietnam and Thailand.

Cleft lip and palate is a significant health concern in Vietnam, affecting an unusually high number of children: one in 500, compared to one in 700 in the West. The high rate is linked to persistent contamination from Agent Orange, or dioxin, that the United States used as a defoliant from 1962–71 during the Vietnam War. Some kids with cleft palate are abandoned by their parents at so-called Agent Orange orphanages or at Buddhist temples. Fastlicht worked in the cleft

palate program at Vietnam's National Hospital of Odonto-Stomatology in Ho Chi Minh City.

Here, devastated parents were shown there was hope for their newborns. Fastlicht recalls one mother who rejected her baby after it was born with

cleft palate. Luckily, the young mom's sister took the infant. After medical treatment showed that the condition was "treatable and that there was a team helping, educating and supporting the family," the mother took the child back, Fastlicht says.

Fastlicht continues to reside in Vancouver while teaching part-time at UBC. Recently, she started her own organization, Planet Smile for Kids, to develop comprehensive and sustainable cleft lip and palate programs in Mexico and Vietnam and, eventually, other countries in southeast Asia. The NGO's broad mandate includes providing equipment, education and training to local professionals. It also collaborates with several Canadian children's hospitals as well as other charitable organizations. The intent, says Fastlicht, is to help transform the trajectory of a patient's life by enhancing their appearance. How a young patient feels about him or herself is integral to "how they integrate into society and live healthy productive lives, enabling them to reach their full potential." ●