



DENTAL TOURISM?

MARCO DENTIST HEADS TO THE ISLANDS TO OFFER FREE CARE

By Lance Shearer
Eagle Correspondent

Robert Abbiati just returned to Marco Island from five days in the Dominican Republic, but he didn't have a lot of time to play tourist. To give him his full title, he is Dr. Robert J. Abbiati, D.D.S., (along with MBA and a MS in accounting), and he was in the island nation to work, providing dental services to local residents at no charge, not to sightsee.

"We were inside for 12 hours a day, doing procedures. We worked the whole time. Then we'd eat dinner and pass out."

"That's the same way we do it here," interjected Patty Parker, front office manager for Abbiati's Marco Island dental office, Island Paradise Dental. As a standard part of his practice, Abbiati commits that patients can be seen the same day when needed.

"That's my guarantee — you will be seen the same day." If necessary, "I'll work till nine o'clock at night. I'll come in on the weekend," he said.

During the recent trip to the Dominican Republic, the Spanish-speaking country that shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, Abbiati said that the foundation organizing the visit told him he had set a record.

"They said I did the most procedures in a weekend of any doctor ever. I did 36 implants, bone grafting, placing membranes and more." Many of the dental patients Abbiati and the 30 other volunteer dentists saw had profound dental problems, compounded by lack of access to proper dental care.

"Many of the patients we saw had only five or six teeth, or none at all. I treated one young girl who I think got punched in the face. Her front teeth were all gone or damaged," said Abbiati. "I extracted three teeth, placed immediate implants, put in membranes and sutured her up."

"We had doctors from all over the U.S., from Alaska and California, and at least one from the U.K.," said Abbiati. "It was a lot of work, but a great experience." Not only did he pay his own way, and perform the dental surgery at no charge, "I paid for all the implants. It cost me close to \$18,000."

Abbiati is a veteran of providing free dentistry to those who need it most. He has previously made trips to Guatemala and Belize, and has worked in the USA as well.

"I have done work in the Bronx and in south-central Los Angeles. I used to do as much as I could in L.A., but the federal government makes it very difficult to do pro bono work in this country."

The Dominican Republic trip was put together by Fundación Dr. Garg, dedicated to improving the Dominican Republic's health care system, and educating the next generation of dentists on the intricacies of dental implants and related subspecialties. By working with actual patients in clinical settings, doctors acquire on-the-job training impossible to replicate in classrooms alone.

"We were treated phenomenally. They realize how



LANCE SHEARER/EAGLE CORRESPONDENT (4)

Front office manager and dental assistant Patty Parker works with Dr. Robert Abbiati at his Marco office. The dentist just returned from a trip to the Dominican Republic, where he performed pro bono dental procedures on dozens of patients in Santo Domingo.



Dr. Robert Abbiati, in his Marco office, points out the plaque he was given after his visit.

valuable the services we were providing are for the country," said Abbiati. "You could tell the local people we were working with were tired, but they said, 'Doctor, keep going.'"

The facilities in Santo Domingo lacked some of the high tech equipment Dr. Abbiati has available in his Marco Island office, he said, but, "they have a new building, and all in all, the facilities were pretty nice."

Here on Marco Island, Abbiati, who has owned his practice for a year and three months, is expanding the office to go from three "operatories" or bays to seven.

"My goal is to be the highest tech dental office on Marco Island, and after our expansion, we should be there," he said. "We have digital X-ray sensors, high definition



IF YOU GO

Island Paradise Dental
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hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday,
or as required

cameras, and we're putting in a 3-D iCat machine to give better views for implant dentistry. We've invested a lot."

The investment in quality, and the dedication to friendly, responsive customer service, has paid off, he said.

"We're adding 90 to 100 new patients a month. A lot of other doctors don't have that level of urgency toward patient care. Once they see how my office works, people tend to keep coming here."

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