India is a vast and varied country with a population of a billion, of which 70 million are disabled—more than the population of the UK. I was looking forward to returning to my home-land and to working alongside those on the Lifeline Express. While the word Delhi may conjure up images of crowding, poverty and sickness, Delhi domestic terminal was like any other European airport—all Jasper Conran-designed hotels, five-star cuisine, designer shops and even a place to grab a coffee and a chocolate muffin. It seems Delhi has changed incredibly since my last visit three years ago.

After a good evening meal (during which I choked over the wine list, as luxury items cost three times more than in London; yet everyday living costs less than one-third), I caught the red-eye flight from Delhi to Jabalpur in the Madhya Pradesh state. Touching down in Jabalpur revealed a complete contrast. A solitary, simple, small, plain concrete terminus greeted us, surrounded by a barren and dusty landscape. Jabalpur is just like many other small towns in India: low rise, an army presence and an air of forbearance from all those who go about their daily routine, especially when it comes to the traffic. Most importantly, it has a railway station!

Lifeline Express

Neelam Kshirsagar, General Manager of Special Projects for Impact India, met me and immediately took me to the Lifeline Express. The train consisting of six or seven brightly painted wagons was parked in the siding, where a platform had been specially built. There were families milling around, waiting their turn for treatment, not worried about the baking platform and extreme heat. A quick tour revealed two operating theatres, three beds in each, with waiting and recovery areas; three large, gleaming, industrial autoclaves; lecture room; stores; office; changing room; staff room; and finally the dental room, all wonderfully air conditioned!

I was introduced to Zelma Lazarus, the charismatic CEO of Impact India. She explained that the Lifeline Express was here to provide free treatment for all, but it could only be successful with the support and cooperation of the local community. Local hospitals had been contacted many months prior to arrival, and teams of local orthopaedic, eye, cleft lip and ENT surgeons agreed to give freely of their time. The local Hitkarni Dental College was also supporting the project. The Director Dr Dhiranwani and his team would be assisting me for the duration of my visit.

Getting things moving

As only certain types of operations could be performed on the train, all patients had to be screened prior to commencement. The orthopaedic team alone saw more than 3,000 patients of which 200 were suitable cases! Lazarus explained that the only way to “get things moving” was to go straight to the ‘District Collector’. He is the head area of local government and in India holds a position of considerable power and influence. He agreed to mobilisie his network of officials to ensure that all in the town and outlying villages would be aware of the visit. The Collector also wanted to meet ‘the dentist from London’, and so at the daily appointed hour he arrived for the inaugural ceremony of the dental suite. He assured me that he was committed to spreading the word and promised me many patients for the next day. To prove his point, he brought along the local television station to interview him with me (which was aired that night!).

The following morning I was raring to go. I hadn’t been this excited about going to work for years. So at 9 am on the dot, I arrived at the platform ready, willing and able only to find the place virtually deserted. Lt Col Randhir Singh Vishwani (who runs the Lifeline Express) invited me into his office for a cup of tea. In the nicest possible way, he explained that in India when a doctor says he starts at 9 am he never arrives before 10!
As a result, patients never turn up before 10:15. The team from the dental college arrived at 9:50. I had thought they would send a dental nurse to assist me, but to my surprise two dentists, Dr Mangesh Ghate and the newly qualified Dr Pratiba Pat- el, a hygienist, Amos; and our nurse, Reena, welcomed me. Dr Ghate explained that as it was my first day they wanted to ensure I was fully supported! He proposed that as it was likely to be very busy we con-centrate on those most in need. Dr Patel and he would initially screen the patients and any non-urgent cases would be asked to return at a later date. Anyone else would be given a written prescription for treatment. This was of enormous assistance, as my Hindi is ter-rible and most patients spoke a local dialect (one of the 1,500 local dialects). 

Patients
True to the Colonel’s word, at 10:15 the first patients arrived and by 11:00 we had a queue of twenty people. We turned the lecture facility into a waiting and post-op room. Extractions and scal-ling were the order of the day. Many patients had never visited a dentist in their life and most had travelled enor-mous distances to be treated. By lunchtime, I had removed more teeth than I had in the past ten years. I was thank-ful for the pristine ultra-sonic scaler, which enabled me to provide some first-time scaling. All those I treated were incredibly grateful and remained stoic despite the considerable pain they had been in (probably for some years).

Dr Ghate later confirmed that they see many cases of Submu-cous Fibrosis at the dental clinic. I remained for the next two days, after which it was time to hand over to Dr Ghate and his team who would continue the service for three weeks. 

Staggering
By the end of my two days, we had seen and treated 62 pa-tients for dental problems, a number that rose to an impres-sive 554 at the end of the three-week clinic. The medical teams on the Lifeline Express also treated 405 patients with eye problems, more than 100 for cleft lips, 85 patients with ear problems, and 211 suffer-ers of polio; in total a stagger-ing 1,154 patients were treated.

Impact India’s ultimate aim is to raise awareness in com-munities of the medical ben-efts available to them, by encouraging them to demand treatment at local and regional health centres. Most poor Indi-ans are illiterate and unaware of their right to treatment. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh those below the poverty line are entitled to £500 (US$850) in treatment a year, paid for by the state. While funds are available to treat those below the poverty line, less than 10 per cent of the allocated funds reach those in need.

On my final day, I asked Lazarus what her ultimate dream for the Lifeline Express would be. “Neil, I hope that one day the train becomes de-funct. If we can educate and inform people of their rights, treatment will be fully pro-vided locally and our train will be surplus to requirements”.

Here’s to hoping!

“Many patients had never visited a dentist in their life”