

2008 Rural Health Practitioner of the Year

Terry Dickinson

Dr. Terry Dickinson has the vision, stamina and “can do” attitude that transformed what dentistry has been able to do for the underserved population of Virginia.

As Executive Director of the Virginia Dental Association, Dr. Dickinson has shown exceptional leadership in developing and sustaining the Mission of Mercy (MOM) projects that have helped thousands of rural people receive care, regardless of their ability to pay. He also led the first dental clinic to reach the people affected by Hurricane Katrina. Under Dr. Dickinson’s leadership, the first Mission of Mercy was held in Wise County, Virginia, in the Appalachian coalfields, at the Lonesome Pine Airport. Amid rain, oppressive heat and humidity, bugs, thunderstorms and power outages, he led a group of dentists, dental hygienists, assistants, students and non-professional volunteers to set up the first temporary dental clinic. He and his dedicated band of volunteers have returned each July to serve growing numbers of underserved Virginians, and the project has become a coveted assignment for dental and dental hygiene students. Dr. Dickinson tirelessly coordinates every aspect of the Mission of Mercy, from the pre-project pep rally to ensuring local follow-up to the hundreds of dental extractions performed.

The project has expanded to multiple sites, but last year, at the Wise County project alone, over 300 volunteers gave in excess of \$1 million in free dental services to 1,323 area residents of Virginia, Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee and even more distant states. This project is the largest dental clinic of its kind. Under Dr. Dickinson’s direction, the Virginia MOM project has received national attention, including a visit from the presidential campaign of John Edwards. It has inspired the creation of similar project in other states.

Dr. Dickinson’s leadership has been steadfast, focused and gentle and, under his guidance, thousands of rural individuals have had their lives changed by oral examinations, prophylaxis, extractions, endodontics and even complete dentures. Many of the volunteers write to tell of how much they look forward to each clinic as most of them say they receive more than they give. Dr. Dickinson has made his Mission of Mercy a “dream come true and a model for the entire country.”