



Photo: Jeff Comber



How Dental Students Learn to Be Advocates for Global Health

In the midst of their studies and during a year of upheaval, Matt Preston, Vivian An, Maddie Jong, and Jacob Thomas (L. to r. above) spent time thinking about a rare but devastating oral disease called noma. Together, the four University of Toronto faculty of dentistry students created the Noma Action Group (NAG) to raise public awareness, educate dental students about the disease and advocate for its inclusion in the WHO Neglected Tropical Diseases list.

Maddie Jong first learned about noma from a U of T professor, who'd treated the disease in Mozambique. "During clinic, Dr. Joel Rosenbloom told me about a documentary he'd just seen about noma," says Jong. "He said he couldn't stop crying throughout the whole film and he said it was a life-changing kind of experience." Jong watched the film and felt it was something all dental students should see. She brought her classmate Jacob Thomas to meet with Dr. Rosenbloom.

"He poured his heart out in the middle of the cafeteria," says Thomas. "It really struck a nerve with us because noma can sometimes be prevented by good oral hygiene." Jong and Thomas were the U of T dental school's community outreach leaders and already had an interest in helping underserved communities. "Noma became our number one priority," says Thomas.

Jong, Thomas and Rosenbloom began to organize the Canadian premiere of *Restoring Dignity: A Journey with*

Noma Survivors (restoring-dignity.com), a documentary made in Nigeria and directed by French filmmakers Claire Jeantet and Fabrice Catérini. At first, they hoped to show the film at the dental school, but when the pandemic made that impossible, they decided to show it virtually.



Maryam, age 4. Courtesy of Inediz: Claire Jeantet and Fabrice Catérini.

"We aren't tech wizards, but I thought immediately of our classmate Matt Preston, who is a tech genius," says Jong. Preston agreed to bring his talents to the project. To bring attention to the screening, they asked another classmate Vivian An to design promotional material for the event. "If she wasn't already becoming a dentist, I think she could be a professional designer," says Thomas.


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The group scheduled the screening for January 2021 and invited co-director Jeantet to do a Q&A session afterward. More than 250 viewers attended, which included members of the U of T dental community, both in Canada and abroad. "Claire Jeantet spent an hour answering questions and because of the time zone difference, it was 1:00 in the morning her time," says Jong. "So she was up quite late, but she was really happy with the event."

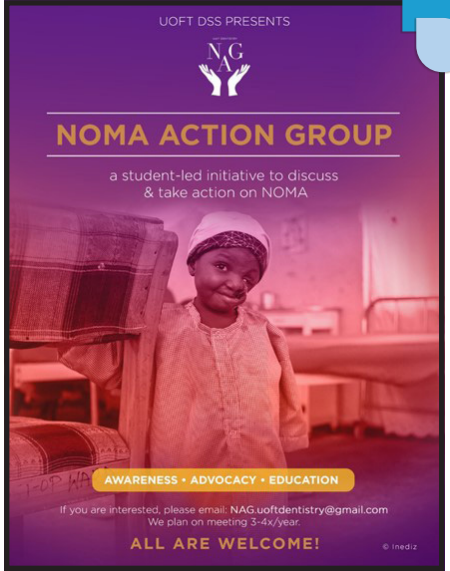
"I think it's important for those of us in North America to have some exposure to other parts of the world, to see how oral health care needs are different," says An. The students say that the pandemic canceled summer programs where they would have traveled internationally, so learning about oral health in sub-Saharan Africa via a film was a useful substitute.

"We had overwhelmingly positive reviews," says Thomas. "We got so many texts afterwards from our peers saying, 'I had no clue about this,' or 'So educational, what a moving story.'"

"This was in the middle of the pandemic, everyone was in lockdown and there wasn't a lot for us to look forward to," says Jong. "And something like this, not only is it inspiring for other people to watch a film that's so educational and eye-opening, it was something for people to look forward to."

In the future, the Noma Action Group hopes to connect with dental students across Canada to bring attention to the disease. "As students, we have the potential to do a lot, but I think we have even more potential once we're out in the professional field," says Jong. "For the four of us, this felt like planting a seed." 


 [Learn more about noma from Doctors Without Borders at: noma.msf.org](http://noma.msf.org)



Noma Facts

Noma, or cancrum oris, is a polymicrobial opportunistic infection resulting in orofacial gangrene and, if left untreated, death. It is caused by a complex interaction between malnutrition, dehydration, compromised immunity and inadequate oral hygiene. It occurs most often in sub-Saharan Africa among children under 7.

Although noma is treatable with antibiotics, survivors often have facial disfigurement. Prevention of the disease is possible through poverty reduction, improved nutrition and the provision of basic health care to children.

 **140,000** Estimated number of children affected by noma each year
90% Fatality rate of untreated noma