

# From my perspective

Late last fall, I had the privilege of participating in a medical mission to an underdeveloped country. Readers of this column may recall that in 2004 I visited the African nations of Kenya and Sudan. For this second trip, I had the opportunity to witness the amazing work that Guy D. Theodore, MD, FACS (who prefers to be called Dr. Guy), and several charitable organizations are carrying out in Pignon, Haiti.

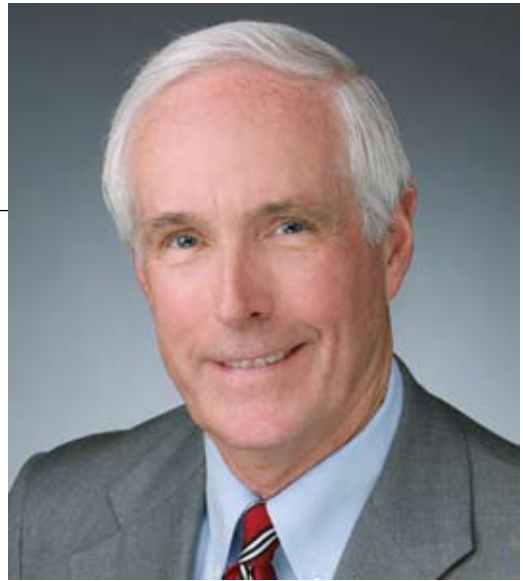
## *Dr. Guy's work*

Participating in these activities really helps to put into perspective the problems we face in this country. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Poverty is rampant, and the ravaging effects of malnutrition are visible on the bodies of young and old alike. Very few people have steady sources of income, and many families live in meager shanties. Potable water is a rare commodity, and people rely on their feet and the occasional donkey for most of their transportation. The infant mortality rate is 97 per 1,000 live births, and the average life expectancy is 51 years. Despite these grim realities, Haitians are generally optimistic and spiritual people who have faith that tomorrow will be a better day.

Dr. Guy has combined forces with several groups that organize medical missions to Haiti to ensure that individuals needing medical care there will, in fact, have healthy futures. He attended medical school in Port-Au-Prince and then completed a general surgery residency in the U.S. He went on to serve in the U.S. Air Force, where he broadened his medical and administrative skills.

Dr. Guy returned to his native city of Pignon with the goal of fulfilling his childhood dream of improving the lives of the people in this mountain community. In 1983, he started training nurses to assist him in providing care at what was then a small clinic and is now Hôpital Bienfaisance de Pignon (Charity Hospital). This 65-bed facility is run by the Comité de Bienfaisance de Pignon, which also sponsors public health, education, drinking water, and reforestation programs in this area that has been stripped of so much of its natural beauty and resources.

I visited the hospital, as well as local schools, orphanages, and community centers, as part of a mission organized through Project Haiti and



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the Community Coalition for Haiti, which are based in Aitkin, MN, and Fairfax, VA, respectively. Taking the lead in this effort were Paul A. Severson, MD, FACS, a general surgeon in Crosby, MN; and Arthur L. Trask, MD, FACS, a general surgeon in Springfield, MO. The hospital contains a state-of-the-art operating room, but it is somewhat lacking in other areas. However, Dr. Guy is working with Project Haiti, the Community Coalition for Haiti, and other groups to ensure that Hôpital Bienfaisance continues to develop into the most advanced medical center in Haiti, if not the entire Caribbean.

## *Doing much with little*

While at the hospital, I had the privilege of watching Dr. Guy's highly regarded surgeons and general surgery residents perform a range of procedures, including cholecystectomy, splenectomy, head and neck operations, and hernia repair. It was fascinating to see what these physicians could accomplish with such a small budget.

Indeed, the entire experience reminded me of how much surgeons practicing in the U.S. take for



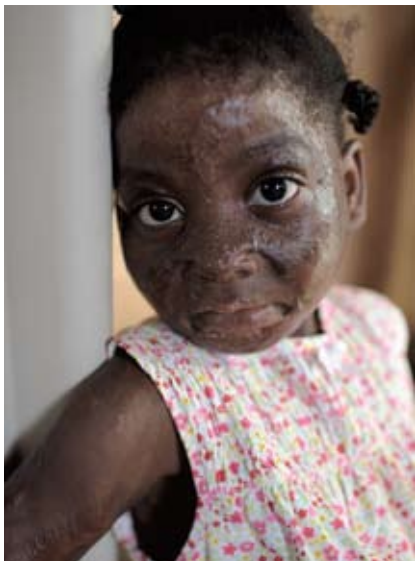
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Dr. Russell tours the hospital with Dr. Guy (speaking to Dr. Russell) and Dr. Trask (right).



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Working in the hospital's skills lab.



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Left: A burn victim who was orphaned when her family home burned down.  
Above: A donkey used to transport water and other belongings.

granted. Unquestionably, we are facing numerous challenges. Medical liability concerns, shrinking reimbursement levels, increasing government interference, and loss of autonomy all detract from the joy of practicing surgery. Nonetheless, we have access to the most advanced technology, work with well-educated professionals, and typically work in facilities that have the necessary and appropriate resources at the ready.

Conversely, participating in outreach programs that support missions like the ones that go to

Haiti allows surgeons to help truly needy patients and to deliver care without worries about liability or reimbursement and without government interference. Furthermore, because the physical and human resources in poorer parts of our own country and around the world are often finite, surgeons must apply more intuitive thinking and be prepared to perform a wide variety of operations on patients who often have a greater set of risk factors than patients in this country do. It's really quite exciting, and the gratitude expressed



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Intubating a patient.



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In the OR.



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A child gathering water.



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Dr. Russell with a polio patient.



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Children at the school run by the Comité de Bienfaisance de Pignon.

by the patients reminds us of why we went into surgery in the first place: to serve others.

I would challenge any surgeon who is growing cynical about surgical practice to participate in a medical outreach program either abroad or within the U.S. I can guarantee that you will come away from the experience with a renewed sense of enthusiasm about our profession. At the same time, I would strongly encourage any surgeon who has had an interest in surgical outreach to get involved now.

### *Operation Giving Back*

The American College of Surgeons has been working to connect surgeons with organizations that sponsor surgical missions through our Operation Giving Back program. Since Operation

Giving Back's Web site was launched in September 2005, this program has attracted the attention of thousands of surgeons interested in ways to engage in volunteerism.

Myriad opportunities exist, with most combining educational outreach with a clinical component of the mission. Here in the U.S., the many innovative efforts to provide surgical care for those in need include the American Project Access Network (APAN), Operation Access, Fresh Start Surgical Gifts, Primary Care Access Network, Surgery on Sunday, and Operation Blessing, among others.

Opportunities are included for surgeons of all specialties all over the world. Some of the dozens of organizations with an international focus include Operation Smile, the Pan-African Academy of Christian Surgeons, Health Volunteers Overseas, Omni Med, International Volunteers in Urology, Physicians for Peace, the Foundation for International Education in Neurosurgical Surgery, Doctors Without Borders, and Global ENT Outreach.

Such organizations provide surgeons with opportunities to lend their skills and talents to individuals around the globe who otherwise would have limited or no access to appropriate care, as well as contributing to much needed infrastructure through education and training. Humanitarian surgical missions are sponsored in places as diverse as the Congo and Portland, ME, or Guatemala City and Jasper, GA.

To learn more about Operation Giving Back, visit <http://www.operationgivingback.facs.org/>, or contact Kathleen Casey, MD, FACS, at [kcasey@facs.org](mailto:kcasey@facs.org). I have no doubt that this resource will point you toward experiences as enriching and rewarding as those I have had in Africa and Haiti.

*Thomas R. Russell, MD, FACS*

If you have comments or suggestions about this or other issues, please send them to Dr. Russell at [fmp@facs.org](mailto:fmp@facs.org).