



Surgery residents and volunteerism

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// You make a living by what you get,
but you make a life by what you give. //

—Winston Churchill

It was another hot morning in the small town of Valladolid, located on the Yucatán peninsula of México. It was 7:00 am and already hundreds of people were standing in long lines, hoping to be seen in our improvised clinic in an old school on the edge of the city.

From babies to elders, our patients had been waiting since dawn. Many of them walked three or four hours from their villages to be seen by the American physicians. The women were dressed in colorful Mayan outfits, their skin tanned from many years under the sun. We received hundreds of shy smiles while making our way to the clinic. Many of the elderly patients only spoke Mayan; the youngsters helped to translate in rudimentary Spanish. We learned that some of the adolescents refused to speak Mayan to avoid possible discrimination from the “mestizos.” Translating to English was sometimes a challenge.

Some patients told us candidly of their long wait to receive medical care. Many times they had to choose between paying for their travel expenses to town or feeding their children. Some patients had advanced medical problems that we could only help by listening to them and giving them medication for symptomatic relief. We made arrangements for those individuals with advanced bone problems to see a group of orthopaedic surgeons who were coming months later. Those patients needing surgical treat-

ment were sent to the local hospital, where we had set up two operating rooms.

Rewarding experience

Almost every year, a couple of residents from our residency program use their vacation time to participate in medical mission trips like this one arranged through International Medical Assistance, and many others have traveled to Africa and Vietnam through other organizations. Some surgeons and residents have brought their children along to instill in them the spirit of giving and compassion and to expand their view of the world. Throughout the years, surgeons and residents from all over the country have volunteered their time and resources to help the underserved; this article describes just one more of those experiences.



The crowd of patients waiting on the first day.

Overleaf: Dr. Bruce Bonnell (right) and Dr. Möller performing an operation in Valladolid.

From October 1 to October 15, 2001, we were two surgical residents working as part of the team of surgeons, anesthesiologists, and nurses from different parts of the U.S. spending two weeks on this mission trip. They were two intense weeks filled with satisfaction. We had the opportunity not only to operate, but to serve as scrub nurses, circulators, and occasionally as anesthesiologists, giving conscious sedation. We learned to improvise when the surgical tools we needed were unavailable and to economize on supplies. We also learned to appreciate the work done by those people who prepare an operating room suite. We mopped the floor and washed and sterilized the equipment for the next surgical day.

For us, this mission became a life-changing opportunity not only to provide care, but to truly understand the nobility of our profession. This

experience stimulated our growth as human beings, our respect for other caregivers, and our drive to continue making a positive change in the world around us. The best reward at the end of the day was knowing that our hands helped to change somebody's life, hopefully for the better. The sincere gratitude in our patients' eyes, their humble smiles, and their uncountable hugs, brought us closer to humanity and were the greatest gifts we received during those weeks. When we look back on this mission trip, we realize that our patients gave us even more than we gave them.

There are numerous opportunities in this country and around the world for surgeons to get involved in missionary programs. These projects can help surgeons give freely of their skills and knowledge to sustain the lives of people who often have nowhere else to turn. Our participation in such



Dr. Möller with a baby she delivered.



Dr. Oreste Romeo and Dr. Möller washing instruments.



Medical staff with the “post-op ladies”—patients who had cholecystectomies, breast lumpectomies, hysterectomies, and other general surgery operations.

activities reminds us of why we chose medicine as a career.

As members of the human race, our real need is to serve and not to be served, for it is in service to others, not in the materialism and individualism so prevalent in our Western culture, that lasting rewards come.

Volunteerism is of pivotal importance to the College and to many of its members and, hence, the subject has attracted much attention in recent years. In recognition of the importance of volunteerism and the contributions many surgeons make, and after closely examining the extent of volunteer involvement among members of the College, the Board of Governors' Committee on Socioeconomic Issues launched “Operation Giving Back” (OGB). The findings from their study demonstrated the great breadth and depth of involvement and underscored the fact that many surgeons consider volunteerism an integral component of their professional identity.

Under the direction of Kathleen M. Casey, MD, FACS, OGB serves as a comprehensive resource center for surgeons investigating volunteer oppor-

tunities. The OGB is intended to educate and inspire those organizations and individuals interested in surgical volunteerism: volunteer agencies, philanthropists, policymakers, the public, and so on.

The Resident and Associate Society of the ACS hopes to encourage resident participation in volunteer activities by providing information about both domestic and international surgical opportunities. Supervised residency electives may provide advanced insight into such issues as health policy, cultural and economic influences on health care, and potential career paths, as well as broader exposure to surgical approach and pathology. The benefits from volunteerism during surgical training are tremendous. □

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