

Los Angeles Pediatric Society E-Newsletter

Volume 1 No. 2

December 2014

MEMBERS GIVING BACK



Working to Make Life in Tanzania “Hakuna Matata”

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Looking back, the process of applying to medical school represents little more than a distant memory. I do remember however, that many of the questions on the application asked me to explain my motivation for wanting to become a doctor. Though at the time I was young and idealistic, the answers I gave are as relevant today as they were then. I wanted my job to benefit people, I wanted to be instrumental in making their lives better, and I wanted to be able to use my education to identify and cure illness and to alleviate suffering.

I have to admit however, that though my ideals pretty much remain the same, they have become clouded in the current climate of practicing medicine. Now, much of my time is consumed with having to fill out authorizations, navigating the minefield of trying to accurately submit claims to insurance companies and basically, just trying to remain financially solvent.

That’s one of the many reasons I found having the opportunity to go and work in Africa to be so rejuvenating; it brought me back in touch with my original motivation for going into medicine. There were no forms, no one scrutinizing my productivity, no discussion of insurance eligibility or staying within administrative guidelines. Instead, there was just a group of caring healthcare professionals and a population of people in need of our help. In return, they offered their unconditional gratitude and appreciation. It may have been for only three weeks, but those three weeks awakened my soul.

I travelled to Tanzania with a group of health care workers representing the Phil Simon Clinic from Huntington Memorial Hospital. In conjunction with several government and private health care facilities in Arusha, Tanzania, The Phil Simon Clinic Tanzania Project is designed to provide clinical care, education, psychosocial support and infrastructure assistance to those agencies involved in HIV/AIDS, internal medicine and orthopedic and reconstructive surgery. My participation was the organizations first official pediatrician on the front line of helping to treat the children in the area.

Gone were the days of having a multitude of diagnostic modalities readily available to assist in patient management. With little more than a stethoscope and otoscope, a long line of sick children accompanied by anxious parents, I dove in. It was exhausting, heart-wrenching, challenging, inspiring, but beyond everything else, incredibly rewarding.

The list of diagnoses was endless: Malaria, pediatric HIV, malnutrition, disseminated parasitic infections, vitamin deficiency, and a plethora of just common pediatric illnesses. I worked in a clinic we set up in Kisongo, a small suburb of Arusha. I also helped to do pre-op checks at St. Elizabeth hospital, a small hospital in the heart of Arusha that serves the needs of the impoverished and where the surgeons from our group took care of a bunch of kids. And finally, we also worked in a clinic in Endulen, a little village in the heart of the magnificent Ngorongoro conservation area.

Many of the children I examined rarely, if ever, saw a physician. With the help of our Tanzanian translators, I took histories, made diagnoses, supplied medications, and, above all else, tried to provide compassionate explanations for why their children were ill.

I wasn't able to help as many of the children as I would have liked. We had neither the means nor the resources. It broke my heart for example, to tell the parents of a six month old girl with hydrocephalus that there was nothing I could do. At the end of the day however, I still believe we were able to make a tremendous difference. Common ailments were cured; drugs for malaria were given, resources for HIV treatment were made available, vitamin therapies were started, and, most importantly, people were given a sense of hope.

Selfishly, something else was accomplished in the process. I was reminded of why I wanted to become a doctor in the first place. Sometimes, the best remedy for burnout isn't to give up, it's to light another candle.

