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MEMBERS GIVING BACK



Lessons from Abroad: Medical Mission

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Dr. Thompson with a young patient with cerebral palsy, who was losing his ability to walk because of muscular contractures. He was treated with soft-tissue surgery, and he walked out of the hospital on post-operative day #1.

The first time I joined a medical mission team was during my fourth year of residency. This was my first trip with the Silver Service Children's Foundation. I was inexperienced and had completed all of my training in quaternary care centers in Chicago. As a result, I was entirely ill-prepared for the pathology that I would see in rural Colombia. During that trip, I learned about rickets (which I had never seen before) and about neglected clubfoot salvage surgeries. I learned how to operate without air conditioning (heaven forbid!), and I learned how to operate without relying on intra-operative x-rays. But more importantly, I learned about team work, compassion, flexibility and resilience.

I offered very little on that trip in terms of surgical experience or excellence, but I offered a set of somewhat-capable hands and a willingness to step out of my comfort zone and approach orthopaedic conditions and deformities with creativity and ingenuity. In returning to Buga as a fellowship-trained pediatric orthopaedic surgeon with the Silver Service Children's Foundation 52nd trip this spring, I was able to offer that same set of hands, albeit a bit more experienced and certainly more facile. Again, I was forced to step outside of my world of advanced imaging and implants galore to approach each child's deformity with ingenuity, creativity and a desire to make him or her *better*.

Since my first trip to Buga in 2013, I have traveled with teams to Colombia, Honduras, Haiti, and Bhutan. On each trip, the goals are slightly different, but the over-arching themes are the same – to operate, to teach, and to be a force for good in each community that graciously opens their doors to North American medical teams. For me, these trips serve a more selfish purpose. Each trip reminds me of the intrepid resident that I was on that first trip to Buga. While that resident

was extraordinarily unqualified to face the challenges that go along with operating outside of North America, she was willing to trust her training, think creatively, work flexibly and to accept hugs for payment.

In joining orthopaedic and scoliosis missions across the world, I reconnect with that resident, and I am reminded of why I chose pediatric orthopaedic surgery as my profession. I chose pediatric orthopaedics to allow each child the ability to walk without burden, to jump and play without pain and to participate in their own lives to their fullest capacity.

In my practice in Los Angeles, much of my time is consumed by paperwork and insurance authorizations, and much of my energy is wasted in scheduling conflicts with our anesthesia colleagues. In Buga, there is no waiting on authorization and there is no division between the anesthesia and surgical teams. There are children who present with vexing orthopaedic conditions, and there are a team of doctors who want to treat those conditions to the best of their abilities. As a result, we work hard on these trips, sometimes operating from 7am until 10 pm, but the work is rewarding, and the team is “all in.” And so the work gets done, the legs get straightened, and my faith in my profession gets restored case-by-case.

The Silver Service Children's Foundation is a group of dedicated orthopaedic surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists and pediatricians who travel to Buga bi-annually to evaluate and treat children with orthopaedic diseases. On this last trip, we evaluated over 200 children and performed 50 procedures on 36 children. Many of these procedures gave children who did not have the ability to walk for more than a few steps at a time the ability to run and jump and play. We treated neglected clubfoot, un-treated hip dysplasia, Rickets deformities, neglected cerebral palsy, and we constructed an ankle where there was none before.

There has been a lot of focus of late on “burn-out” in young physicians. Solutions offered typically focus on work-life balance and self-care. And while I appreciate the importance of having a life outside of the OR, these trips are *my* salve. These children, their families and the medical teams that travel to these remote places to make children *better* are what keep me sane. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to join this group as a resident, as its mission has sustained me during the first few years of my practice. In offering the opportunity for more residents to be involved in international medical missions, we will create a more compassionate, well-rounded, happier medical work-force.



Dr. Thompson (left) operating with a team of American and Colombian surgeons to reconstruct an ankle in an 11-year-old young boy.



The team in Buga, Colombia, including surgeons, anesthesiologists, pediatricians, nurses, scrub technicians, and resident physicians.