

Physicians for Peace Sets Standards for PA Medical Missions

BY ASHLEY KENT

In a world where 90 percent of the global disease burden is carried by parts of the world that have only 10 percent of its medical resources, Physicians for Peace (PFP) is making a difference. Unlike many of its counterparts, the international non-profit humanitarian organization doesn't just send medical teams into the developing world to provide health care services. According to CEO Brig. Gen. Ron Sconyers (USAF, Ret.), one of the main goals of the Virginia-based group is to train medical professionals who live in developing countries so that sustainable capability remains long after the mission teams are gone.

"About 80 percent of what we do is training and the other 20 percent is clinical work that comes as a result of the training," Sconyers said. "So our training may be in the classroom, but for the most part it's hands on: working with the patients, showing our partners who are health care providers how to do it, not just telling them how to do it."

Medical professionals in 55 developing countries have benefitted from PFP's training, which includes programs in burn surgery, orthopedics, physical therapy, pediatric ophthalmology, and prosthetics, among others.

At PFP, the majority of its medical missions are, according to Sconyers, "sustainable programs that are managed through a series of deployments." Once a country's specific need is determined, teams are formed based on that need. "We might bring in a surgeon from Boston and an anesthesiologist from Seattle and a nurse from Houston," Sconyers said.

The teams are sent on weeklong missions to locations where there is already a hospital or medical school. A typical workweek is Monday morning through Friday night with long hours; the rest of the time is for travel and sight-seeing. Once the week is over, the volunteers can leave knowing their work will continue. "They're not just going in and doing surgeries and somebody else is doing the follow up. They've gone in and they've trained 3 or 4 providers who will carry on their work."

Medical teams are made up mostly of American physicians, nurses, dentists, and other medical providers, but also successful expatriates who want to give back to their home countries. Sconyers hopes these teams will eventually include PAs.

"One of the things PFP wants to do is [develop] more bench strength in our volunteers ... my understanding of a PA is they can go on just about any mission that we have because they're more generalists than specialists, and could provide a tremendous service," said Sconyers, who has gone on about 15 medical mission trips with PFP.

Virginia-based PA Dan Thibodeau, an AAPA Board of Directors member who works at Eastern Virginia Medical School, has been volunteering his time with PFP for about



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Haile Mezghebe, M.D., a PFP staff member and the Director of Postgraduate Medical Education for the Partnership for Eritrea, examines a patient in Asmara, Eritrea. The partnership is a joint effort among PFP, The George Washington University Medical Center, and the Eritrean Ministry of Health.

three years. Although his schedule hasn't allowed him to take part in a PFP mission trip, Thibodeau said the group is a good match for PAs.

"I think this is an organization that has really started off on the right foot with regard to PAs. And they have already set up and have already done the ground work for developing job descriptions and protocols that are in line with AAPA about how they would utilize PAs on international missions."

Thibodeau noted that the very nature of a PA's job lends itself to the kind of educational missions PFP undertakes. "I think one of the unique things to PAs is that, in general, I think we are very good at teaching and we are good at communicating to people. And it's that human touch that we do a very good job with. And that's exactly the most important thing that these people need. Number two, PAs are very good at education. We spend a lot of time educating our patients and so I think that fits the mold with PFP, which really concentrates on the education side."

Edward Lilly M.D., a retired gastroenterologist based in Virginia, is one of the leaders of PFP's efforts in Haiti. He has taken part in eleven medical mission trips to Haiti since 1990 and was recently honored by PFP for his efforts. During one of his clinics, Lilly worked until midnight screening more than 200 people for endoscopies, a process he said would have been "so much more efficient" with a PA on board to identify symptoms.

In addition to providing clinical care and medical training, PFP practices what former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson called "medical diplomacy." Sconyers noted that while PFP is not an advocacy group, it still demonstrates peace by offering medical services to all countries, regardless of their world status. In fact, Sconyers said PFP is the only NGO operating in the African country of Eritrea because of its strained relationship with the U.S. "That's of no mind to us because the important thing is, to quote former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, M.D.: 'We're using medicine as the currency for peace.'"

"Health is the great equalizer," Sconyers explained. "When you have a community that has failing health or that is racked by poverty, that is where insurgents take over; that's where terrorism has its roots."

Physicians for Peace has provided medical care and training in 20 countries this year alone, including Sri Lanka, India, Philippines, the Dominican Republic, five African countries, as well as the West Bank in the Middle East. In Eritrea, a country with only five pediatricians for 5 million people, PFP teamed up with The George Washington University Medical Center to develop a residency pro-

gram for the country's two-year-old medical school. The country's first postgraduate classes in pediatrics and general surgery were launched in January. "This is a program we're pretty excited about because we think it can eventually be replicated throughout Africa," Sconyers said.

While large-scale projects such as the one in Eritrea require full-time resources, Sconyers said the weeklong mission trips are a good fit for PAs and others who may have work or family commitments. That's why PFP does its best to make the process as easy as possible for volunteers. "Once they're selected for a mission, we handle everything. We get their passports; we get their visas; we make their airline reservations; we make their hotel reservations... They get there and it's a done deal, and they go to work."

Sconyers noted that, depending on need, not everyone who volunteers gets assigned to a mission. Also, volunteers may be asked to share the cost of the trip. But, "They'll discover that they can do things that they never thought they could do. In the United States, medical professionals get so used to having a full pharmacy or being able to ask for an X-ray or whatever. They're not going to have that over there. So they're going to go by what they learned and by what their heart tells them to do."

And often for volunteers, their hearts are changed after taking part in a medical mission. Sconyers recalled a recent trip to Nigeria where he met a 13-year-old girl who was facing surgery for a fistula which had made her unable to control her urine or bowels for four years. "She can't speak English but when you look in her eyes you can see her soul. And you know that for that one girl, you have made an amazing difference. And you live with that for the rest of your life."

Lilly cautioned that PAs and others should think carefully before committing to a medical team.

"Most Americans still have no concept of what it's like to live on \$2 a day," Lilly said. "To see people with no clothes, no shoes, no water; trying to live in lean-tos; having to beg; trying to farm where there's no arable land; trying to make something happen where it's virtually impossible. It's a shock to your brain to experience that first hand."

"I always come back from a mission thinking 'Gosh, there's so much more we could have done.' That makes you want to go back and do more." But, he noted that in his work at PFP, he has seen small efforts make a difference across the globe. "We're not going to change the world except doing it one step at a time."

For more information about Physicians for Peace, visit www.physiciansforpeace.org. Individual PAs as well as PA/physician teams are encouraged to apply as volunteers. Medical supply donations are also welcome.



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A patient in Eritrea awaits diagnosis after receiving an x-ray.