

St. Clare's Hospital team journeys to Honduras on medical mission

'Brigade' brings healing ministry to poorest of poor

DENVILLE

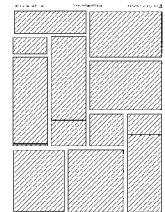
THEY traveled 2,000 miles by air and four hours on gravel roads to reach the Santo Hermano Pedro Hospital in Catacamas, Honduras. The "Brigade" from St. Clare's Hospital here included two anesthesiologists, a urologist, two obstetricians/gynecologists, an infectious disease specialist, an emergency room specialist, and nurses and volunteers who went to Honduras on a one-week medical mission to provide free medical care to the local residents of Catacamas. Armed with supplies provided by St. Clare's Health System, the veteran clinicians packed nearly everything they would need in their suitcases to perform intricate surgeries and provide much-needed medical care. Many of the people in the region cannot afford basic health care, and are too far away to access the medical attention they need. They rely on selfless volunteer health professionals such as the St. Clare's "Brigade" to staff health care missions such as these.

Before the "Brigade" arrived in Honduras, local radio stations had been touting their impending arrival. Many patients traveled great distances from outlying areas to arrive at the hospital for a chance to receive treatment by these physicians. While some of the physicians performed surgeries at the remote but new hospital, others went deep into the Honduran countryside to

visit patients in their villages, homes and parishes, where the population is unable to travel to the hospital. In these remote locations, Dr. Donald Allegra and the medical team held several clinics and made house calls to provide wound care, give vaccinations, and provide routine medical care. They treated many children with fungal infections and skin diseases. The estimated number of children infected with parasites ranges from 20 to 40 percent in this area.

Relatively routine surgical procedures such as abdominal and vaginal hysterectomies, ovarian surgery and prostatectomies that those in the United States may take for granted are life-changing events for some of the patients treated by the St. Clare's "Brigade." For example, one man treated by urologist Dr. Vincent Cubelli came to the hospital with a bladder catheter, which drained into a plastic shopping bag that had been inserted four years before. The patient underwent a surgical procedure and left Santo Hermano Pedro Hospital that day without a catheter for the first time in four years. Another patient, an 83-year-old woman with a dropped uterus and bladder, came to the hospital for treatment. She had been told at the age of 50 that there was no corrective surgery available for her. She underwent a procedure performed by Drs. Dreyfuss and DiBenedetto to correct her condition.

The ORs had limited equipment,



which made surgical cases unusually challenging. "You come up against many challenges in the OR that you don't at home," said anesthesiologist Dr. Jill Young. "We had to overcome many difficulties as we moved through the week." In commenting on Dr. DiBenedetto's mentorship, Dr. Young said, "He was a great surgical leader and without him, we would not have been able to perform as many cases as we did."

There was a great sense of camaraderie among all who took part in this mission. They worked together each day from 6 a.m. until 9 p.m. or later and shared meals in a small dining hall. The hospital had a separate wing that they called home for the stay. During the trip, anesthesiologist Dr. Maggie Ho celebrated a birthday with her colleagues as well as with staff from the local hospital.

As with most medical missions, this trip was about more than reaching out to the Honduran people through medicine. It had an impact on the lives of the team members in ways they will never forget. In reflecting on his experiences in Honduras, Dr. DiBenedetto said, "I have no words to explain what I received from taking part in this mission. It's a tremendous feeling, and we want to go back next year to continue to help the people of Honduras."

The group is already looking ahead to next year's mission and would like to perform orthopedic and general surgeries. The St. Clare's "Brigade" would also like to include two scrub nurses to maximize efficiencies that would allow for even more patients to be treated.

All who participated in this mission came back feeling spiritually renewed. "Doing this work in Honduras brought us back to the basics and why we became doctors," said Dr. Donald Allegra. "It wasn't about us ... we were on a mission, and St. Clare's did a great job in supporting our mission." Dr. Dreyfuss added, "We had a wonderful team of physicians, nurses, and lay volunteers from the St. Clare's community, each of us responsible for our own individual expenses. With the extra financial support of St. Clare's, including donations of surgical equipment and supplies from our Denville campus, we were able to help the poor and underserved in a faraway place... realizing the St. Clare's mission in a global way."

This year's "Brigade" members included Annette Allegra, RN, MSN; Dr. Donald Allegra, Dr. John Allegra, Stephen Allegra, Donna Cubelli, Dr. Vincent Cubelli, Dr. Robert DiBenedetto, Dr. Patricia Dreyfuss, Dr. Maggie Ho, Maria Naeem, RN; Marissa Naeem, and Dr. Jill Young.



HOUSE CALL — One of the Honduran homes visited by the physicians and team members who made house calls.



"THE BRIGADE" — The St. Clare's "Brigade" (listed alphabetically): Annette Allegra, RN, MSN; Dr. Donald Allegra; Dr. John Allegra; Stephen Allegra; Donna Cubelli; Dr. Vincent Cubelli; Dr. Robert DiBenedetto; Dr. Patricia Dreyfuss; Dr. Maggie Ho; Maria Naeem, RN; Marissa Naeem; Dr. Jill Young.



IN THE O.R. — St. Clare's physicians performed urological and gynecological surgical procedures during their medical mission to Honduras.



HOME VISIT — Maria Naeem, RN takes a blood pressure reading of an older woman at her home during the house calls made by the St. Clare medical team in the Honduran countryside.