Compassion is Universal
Local Health Providers Reflect on Recent Medical Mission to Haiti

An Unusual Day

When Ziad Sifri, MD, arrived at work at the New Jersey Trauma Center at University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ)-University Hospital on January 13, he already knew the day would be an eventful one. As a trauma and critical care surgeon there, Sifri cares for patients with injuries that, on any given day, could be the result of a car crash, a gunshot wound, or possibly an industrial accident.

January 13 proved to be different. The night before, one of the worst earthquakes on record had ravaged Haiti, and news about the disaster was beginning to circulate around the globe. The images were unimaginable—dead bodies by the thousands and rubble in every direction.

Like most people, Sifri had been watching the images on television and online. Within eight days, however, he would be witnessing the catastrophe firsthand.

The ISHI team members who traveled to Haiti were:
Seated: Jean Daniel Eloy, MD and Mae Tingson, RN
Rear: (l to r): Ziad Sifri, MD, Diego Reino, MD, Sue Walsh, CRNA and Kevin Clarke, MD.

ISHI

As part of the nonprofit organization International Surgical Health Initiative (ISHI), Sifri and five of his hospital colleagues left for Haiti on January 21. Along with another physician, Asha Bale, and photographer Vishnu Hoff, Sifri co-founded the organization in 2009 after a medical mission to Ghana. ISHI, which has 25 volunteers, provides surgical care for underserved people around the world and had just returned from a medical mission to Guatemala last October. Although the group was planning another medical mission for later in 2010, the Haiti earthquake reconvened them much sooner.

“We had a strong desire to go there and help in any way that we could,” said Sifri, who is also an assistant professor of surgery at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School. “We would have gone sooner, but it was difficult to make the connections to join a team there.”

Within 48 hours after making those connections, ISHI doctors and nurses had made their flight arrangements and gathered supplies, and were headed to Florida. There, they joined another group of eight surgeons, three anesthesiologists, one nurse anesthetist, and four nurses. One plastic surgeon and two additional nurses joined them five days into the mission.

Controlled Chaos

“It was like controlled chaos,” said Diego Reino, MD, a surgical resident at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School who also traveled to Haiti with ISHI. Despite the disorganization immediately following the earthquake, said Reino, the cooperation among the various countries was very impressive.

Reino, whose wife was initially concerned about his safety in Haiti, said that in the midst of the chaos, the country was surprisingly calm and peaceful.

“I felt more comfortable being there than being here,” he said. “I felt more relaxed being there than being at home watching it on TV.”

Doctors Sifri and Reino were also joined by four of their UMDNJ-University Hospital colleagues: Kevin Clarke, MD, a surgical oncologist and an assistant professor at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School; Jean Daniel Eloy, MD, an anesthesiologist and Haiti native; Mae Tingson, RN, an operating room nurse; and Sue Walsh, CRNA, a nurse anesthetist.

“Everyone felt compelled to do something,” said Dr. Clarke. “We went on the fact that it was the right thing to do. It’s a global community, not just the United States; all of us had a strong desire to help.”

Once in Haiti, the ISHI team joined a larger group of physicians from Connecticut, New York, Florida, and Texas. Together, they completed 82 surgeries during an eight-day period and treated nearly 1,000 people. Their patients consisted primarily of earthquake victims who were temporarily housed under tents in a soccer stadium. The doctors set up their own triage system in the stadium and sent patients requiring more urgent care to Eliazar Germain—a 45-bed hospital. Located on Rue-Panaméricaine, Pétion-Ville, the hospital is approximately 15 minutes from Port-au-Prince.

Although most of the doctors and nurses were accustomed to a more state-of-the-art hospital setting, they learned to improvise very quickly. They divided their time between treating patients at the soccer stadium and the hospital and set up their own protocols to make the system run smoothly. At no cost to the patients, ISHI arranged transportation between the hospital and soccer field. In some instances, the doctors traveled in the taxi with the patients, making their way through the rubble of Port-au-Prince and smelling the dead bodies. Since the hospital did not have an elevator, the doctors and nurses carried patients up and down the stairs on gurneys.

Despite the earthquake, Haitians were able to use their cell phones and would often call people to let them know that doctors were at the soccer field and at the hospital.

“Word of mouth really worked,” recalled Sifri.

Mae Tingson, RN, who travelled with ISHI to Guatemala, said the compassion of the doctors and surgeons was quite compelling.

“They did everything for the patients,” she said. “Everything. They even hugged them when they were in pain.”

Many patients came to the hospital in excruciating pain after lying in the street for days.

“The wounds were horrific,” recalled Sifri. “Some were infected down to the bone.”

Many of the wounds, he said, were the result of surgeries not performed in ideal places under ideal conditions. Dozens of patients had lower extremity fractures, and gangrenous lower limb wounds were also common.

“Other than being a mother, it’s the most important thing I’ve done in my life.”
Sue Walsh, CRNA

In one instance, Sifri found a seven-month-old baby girl who had been left alone in the soccer stadium. As a result of injuries from the earthquake, her mother was unable to care for her, and she became dehydrated. Fortunately, the baby responded well to treatment and was reunited with her mother after a short stay at Eliazar Germain.

The trip to Haiti proved that compassion is universal and has no borders. For some members of the group, the mission had an even more personal significance.

Anesthesiologist Jean Daniel Eloy, MD, who immigrated to the United States from Haiti in 1996, accompanied ISHI back to his native country. He spent three days with the group before going to see his family on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince.

“Being one of them, I felt compelled to go,” said Dr. Eloy, referring to his Haitian heritage. “I felt it was my duty to go.”

In recalling their experiences in Haiti, the doctors said that saving lives in the United States is crucial, but doing their part to help others outside of the country is just as important.

Sue Walsh, CRNA, the nurse anesthetist on the ISHI team, agreed.

“Other than being a mother, it’s the most important thing I’ve done in my life,” she said.