

NYP Team Takes Much-Needed Health Care to Haiti

When a team of NewYork-Presbyterian Ambulatory Care Network staff headed to Haiti this spring on a health care relief mission, they were doing more than helping out in the country's existing orphanages and missions; they were also building health care services from the ground up.

"This year, it's not like we only went to a facility, we also actually created the facility," says Colleen Ward-Mujica, a registered nurse in Pediatric Clinical Special Studies at NYP/Weill Cornell. "We literally went out to the middle of the countryside, where you don't even really see houses — you may see a cluster of mud huts here and there — and we put up tents and saw 80 patients a day."

Ms. Ward-Mujica has been volunteering in Haiti since 1996, when she took part in a church mission trip that inspired her not only to become a nurse but also to dedicate herself to Haiti's poorest and most disadvantaged people. After living in Haiti and working as a school nurse for six months, and working in New Jersey as an emergency room nurse, she now organizes two health care trips to Haiti each year while working at NYP.

The most recent trip, in March, included a team of NYP staff members — five registered nurses, four nurse practitioners and Assistant Attending Pediatrician Sima Toussi, M.D., who specializes in pediatric infectious diseases — who spent eight days working in and around Ouanaminthe, a city in northeastern Haiti near the border with the Dominican Republic.

Over the course of the trip, the team provided basic health care services for several days each at Lakajou Clinic, a makeshift health care facility comprised of tents that the team carried to the countryside; at Massef Orphanage; and at the Hope for Haiti Children's Center.



(TOP) The Haiti team included: (from left) Kirsten Malone, C.P.N.P.; Colleen Ward-Mujica, R.N.; Theresa Ferreira, R.N.; Claudette Daly, R.N.; Ginny Patton, C.P.N.P.; Carmel Hippias, C.P.N.P.; Mo Bowman, R.N.; Jessica Capizzi, R.N.; Shaama Chahould, R.N.; and Sima Toussi, M.D. (RIGHT) This child received treatment for asthma.



Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and, according to the World Health Organization, approximately 47 percent of Haitians lack access to basic health care, and half lack access to basic drugs.

In addition to providing amenities like toys, clothes, soap and toothbrushes to children and parents, the team also performed more than 400 physical exams and distributed more than 10,000 vitamins and hundreds of doses of pediatric antibiotics.

Amazingly, the NYP staff on "Team Ouanaminthe" raised all the necessary funds to purchase essential medicines on their own and canvassed their churches, colleagues and friends for donations like toys and shoes.

The nurses covered their own travel

costs, and many provided unique skills such as Creole translation or fund raising.

Getting supplies was only half the battle, though. "Each person carried two 50-pound bags, and we carried everything ourselves by hand for the clinic," Ms. Ward-Mujica says. At the border, that meant loading 1,500 pounds of medical supplies into wheelbarrows and walking them a mile from the Dominican Republic into Haiti because trucks are not allowed to pass. "It was hard work, under harsh conditions," says Carmel Hippias, C.P.N.P. "We needed each other to get through the week."

In the short term, Ms. Ward-Mujica is working on establishing nonprofit status for the group so they can fund raise more

efficiently. In the long term, the team hopes to establish a partnership with the Hope for Haiti Children's Center and implement a program of regular health care visits by NYP staff.

"The experience gave me the opportunity to give back to the wonderful people of my parents' birthplace, a place I hold dear to my heart," says Regine Cuvilly, R.N. "It was incredibly rewarding for me on so many different levels."

To support the NYP Nurses for Haiti program, contact Ms. Ward-Mujica at clw9009@nyp.org. ■