

Hospital Team Makes 7th Honduras Visit; Byer Honored for Brigade's Service



On October 28, Virginia Hospital Center's Medical Brigade departed for its annual humanitarian-healthcare mission trip to Honduras with its largest team yet. A crew of 77 doctors, surgeons, nurses, and non-medical support personnel each donated a week of vacation to treat 6,885 underserved Honduran citizens in Comayagua and four other poverty-stricken, outlying rural villages.

"It's an amazing group of people who work so well together and work so hard to make this operation possible every year," says Barry Byer, MD, Chief of Family Medicine and the Founder and Director of the Brigade. "It's real teamwork in the best sense of the word. It was a huge team and we needed each and every person."

Medical services provided included adult and pediatric primary care, ophthalmology, physical therapy and 109 surgical operations. For the first time, a certified audiologist joined the team, fitting and tuning hearing aids for 35 patients, including a 12-year-old girl who was able to hear for the first time in her life.

Refurbished eyeglasses were fitted to 2,400 adults and children following on-site autorefractor examinations. Countless sets of crutches, walkers, and wheelchairs were provided to the physically impaired. Surgical operations ranged from Cesarean sections and hysterectomies, to laparoscopic gall bladder procedures, to numerous corrective strabismus surgeries, to ENT procedures, to plastic surgery, including a four-hour procedure to

help a 16-month-old girl, burned when wind blew a candle into her crib.

The team forwarded two steamship containers in advance, with their largest-ever load of medications, supplies, and equipment to date—including a fully equipped and refurbished ambulance. Valued at some \$600,000, these much-needed items were acquired with the financial support of over 220 individuals and corporate entities.

To help improve community health on a sustained basis, the Brigade expanded its mission with the new Remote Village Project. Supported by the Honduran government, the project taught six rural community leaders from two remote villages to function as certified Community Health Workers.

They will provide year-round counseling on community health improvements and preventive care, focusing on issues such as accessing and utilizing available treatment for tuberculosis, and the importance of clean water, proper nutrition, hygiene and proper body mechanics for lifting. They've also been given the equipment, medications and training needed to actually diagnose and treat a pre-set, limited number of medical conditions common in the area including infant diarrhea, ear infections, bronchitis, simple skin disorders and intestinal parasites.

This extraordinary program, which began in 1999 after the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, recently garnered Dr. Byer recognition from the Virginia Medical Society Foundation, which honored him with its Salute to Service Award for Service to the International Community. Created three years ago, the Salute to Service Awards recognize physicians who go above and beyond for their communities. "The international community award is for physicians who give their all to serve patients in other countries," says Beth Bortz, the Foundation's Executive Director. "Dr. Byer's incredible commitment to the people of Honduras, and his foresight in creating Crosslink International, which brings the medications and supplies to people in those countries, really epitomize what this award is all about."

The award was presented at the Foundation's gala event at the Kingsmill Resort in Williamsburg on November 3, by Virginia's First Lady, Anne Holton. Since Dr. Byer was actually in Honduras with the Brigade at the time, she presented the award to Hospital President & CEO James B. Cole. "Governor Tim Kaine did a year's missionary service in Honduras, so he and his wife felt a personal connection to recognizing Dr. Byer for his service," said Bortz.

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