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EXCELA HEALTH CLINICIANS OPEN HEARTS AND HANDS TO HAITI

GREENSBURG, PA, AUGUST 26, 2013... Give them a week and they can change the world. Sounds dramatic, but for people of Haiti, visits by medical missionaries are life-altering.

Greensburg neurologist Mike Mazowiecki, MD, first made this journey in 1998. This past June, Excela Health general surgeon Richard Payha, MD and RN Kim Beck, a facilitator in Excela's continuous improvement program, accompanied Dr. Mazowiecki to Port au Prince where they worked alongside a team from the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix at St. Luc Hospital. At the beginning of the year, Greensburg medical oncologist John Waas, DO, shared the experience as did several former Excela Health nurses.

Dr. Mazowiecki "fell in love with Haiti and its people" on his first trip, but having just started a family, he had to delay returning to this impoverished island country until his sons were older. Two and a half years ago he committed to a semi-annual visit, and as his children grow they, too, are opening their hearts to Haiti. The oldest of his four boys, John, turned 13 during his first visit to Haiti last year.

Following the 2010 earthquake that rocked the nation, Dr. Mazowiecki read an appeal in a neurology journal for assistance. "Haiti needs everything," he stressed. "There are only five neurologists in the entire country and they are all fee for services so care costs a lot. To see a doctor runs upwards of 60 to 80 U.S. dollars by the end ... it costs money to make the appointment, see the doctor the day of the appointment, then costs more to actually get the diagnosis

from the doctor. With the average Haitian making \$1 a day, that's three months salary."

In such abject poverty, Haitians rarely get the medical attention they need. Ripe for stroke, the natives suffer from poorly controlled hypertension because they lack the literacy skills to understand how to manage a condition through diet or medication even when it's provided.

Epilepsy, seizure disorders and head trauma post-earthquake are common. "The hospital has some older drugs but these same ailments could be managed better in the United States. When we are successful in finding something that works, it changes a person's life."

Sometimes it's enough just to help a person understand what's wrong. Dr. Mazowiecki noted that a Haitian school teacher in her 50s had suffered with migraine headaches and a cramp in the back of her neck for years. In the United States, this condition is treated with \$1,000 Botox injections. "I could diagnose what was wrong, but there wasn't a lot to be done about in Haiti. Even people in the United States might not choose this expensive treatment. She is a product of her environment, but it was of some benefit just to know."

A native of southern California, Dr. Mazowiecki "has a heart for medical mission. I love doing it. I traveled to Tijuana, Mexico and now to Haiti. I feel honored and blessed to be able to help."

Being able to affect long-lasting change is a new goal for Dr. Mazowiecki and he hopes to follow a pattern already established by a gastroenterologist who goes to Haiti monthly. That physician has trained a Haitian hospital worker to conduct testing so the doctor can concentrate his time on treatment procedures. Dr. Mazowiecki has asked if a similar opportunity might exist in the area of neurology. "If there is a person with an interest in internal medicine, I can help them increase their understanding of neurological disorders through shadowing experiences. They won't be a neurologist but they will definitely be an asset to the Haitian community."

While Dr. Mazowiecki is a veteran at providing health care under adverse conditions, Dr. Payha and Beck were new to this experience. They, too, came away forever changed.

Interested in medical mission work, "I was open to everything," said Beck. She spent her first day cleaning out an operating room that had been used for storage, then on pre- and post-operative duties. Having the benefit of the extra hands from the Mayo Clinic team as well as a surgical resident from Boston meant they could conduct 54 surgeries during their weeklong visit. "It wouldn't have been possible if the other team had not been there at the same time. The synchronicity brought together one big team."

With remodeling under way in Westmoreland Hospital's ambulatory surgery center, Beck was able to collect supplies that were soon to expire for use in Haiti. "We used every spinal needle kit we took."

The operating room setting was primitive by U.S. standards. Head lamps provided lighting in a close environment with nonexistent air conditioning. And the team was dependent upon rough translations of French Creole or pictures and sign language to communicate with the lone Haitian scrub team. Having instructed physician assistants and medical students, Dr. Payha was unfazed by the situation, recognizing he needed to employ whatever technique necessary to bridge the language and experience barriers.

During the time the medical team was on duty, Dr. Mazowiecki's son and Dr. Payha's daughters – Anna Kate, 15 and Abby, 14 - visited a nearby orphanage to provide diversion for the children. Most heart-wrenching for the teens was the daily Mass celebrated at St. Damian Hospital before the workday began. "There are no funeral homes, so the hospital functions as a morgue and the bodies are cremated," explained Dr. Payha. "Most days there were sheathed bodies before us to be blessed. My girls were in tears to know that there were several infants who had died grouped together." Still Dr. Payha found this time inspirational as well. "The priest used incense during the Mass – a costly thing - to offer the deceased the dignity and respect in death they were deprived of in life."

The Excela Health medical missionaries are already thinking about future trips. Dr. Payha is investigating Honduras as a possibility, and of course, Haiti will forever benefit from skilled clinicians who have hearts and hands that heal.