



Volunteer Physicians Change Lives: Their Patients' & Their Own

VOLUNTEERING TO GO TO ECUADOR AS A resident not only changed the lives of the children whose cleft lips and palates he repaired, it also changed the course of the professional career of **Brian Rubinstein, MD, Pediatric Head and Neck Surgery, Sacramento**. “Before that trip in 2001, I was probably going to do general ear, nose and throat surgery,” he recalls. “The mission sparked a passion within me, and changed my direction to wanting to do craniofacial and pediatric head and neck surgery here at home.”

That initial experience led to four other volunteer trips to Ecuador and ultimately inspired Dr. Rubinstein to create Faces of Tomorrow with two other TPMG physicians who shared his passion for international volunteerism – **Nima Pahlavan, MD, Head and Neck Surgery, Sacramento**, and **Charles Shih, MD, Head and Neck Surgery, Oakland**. “We were residents at UC Davis together, had been on volunteer missions to Ecuador together and wanted to continue to work together,” explains Dr. Rubinstein.

With the goal of providing medical and surgical services to children with facial deformities, the first Faces of Tomorrow mission to Ecuador in 2009 was staffed mainly by TPMG physicians and other staff. And in honor of their own introduction to volunteering overseas, Drs. Rubinstein, Pahlavan and Shih invited two Head and Neck Surgery residents to join them – one each from UC Davis and KP Oakland.

Supporting MD Volunteers

TPMG has a strong tradition of volunteerism both at home and abroad – devoting time to help people in need. And it just got easier for TPMG physicians and KP residents to donate their services, thanks to two new efforts launched in 2010: the Global Health Program and the KP Cares volunteer website.



TPMG head & neck surgeons and founders of Faces of Tomorrow: **Nima Pahlavan, MD; Charles Shih, MD; and Brian Rubinstein, MD**, are all smiles after a successful cleft lip repair on the infant held by a grateful mother in Quito, Ecuador.

The Global Health Program provides a structure that enables physicians and residents to volunteer for medical assignments in underserved areas around the world. The first approved program is Matibabu Foundation, founded in 2004 by **Gail Wagner, MD, Oncology, Hayward**, to provide medical care, training and equipment to the people of Ugenya, Kenya.

With a focus on HIV/AIDS and malaria, Matibabu has established a full-time clinic, staffed by a Kenyan physician and 70 other local employees, and supplemented by a steady stream of medical professionals from the United States. “In 2009, we had more than

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“On the one hand you have patients who need help, and on the other hand you have physicians volunteering to help them. The equation couldn’t be simpler or more beautiful.”

– John Chuck, MD
Medicine, Davis

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50 volunteers go to Matibabu, the majority of whom were TPMG physicians,” reports Dr. Wagner. Three KP residents are scheduled to go to Matibabu in spring 2010.

Global Health Program

The KP Global Health Program both supports the social mission of TPMG and is a response to the growing interest in global medicine among medical students. “Ten years ago you could count on one hand the number of university medical schools that had global health programs. Now there are more than 80,” reports **Hernando Garzon, MD, Emergency, Roseville, and TPMG Coordinator of Physician Volunteerism.**

“Nearly one-third of today’s medical students have had a volunteer health experience abroad, and even more have volunteered in the US,” notes **Theresa Azevedo, Associate Institutional Director, Regional Graduate Medical Education.** “For our residency programs to be considered among the top in the nation, we need to offer a global health program.”

During her years as a medical student at the University of Utah, working on her MD and MPH with a focus on international health, **Lisa Ryujin, MD, Ob/Gyn Resident, Oakland,** not only volunteered at an Indian reservation in Utah, she also traveled to Kenya, Tibet and Central America to study and provide medical care. She chose the residency program at KP Oakland in part because of the local and international volunteer activities of **Program Director Laura Minikel, MD,** and a number of

the other attending physicians in the department.

Dr. Ryujin is scheduled to go to Matibabu in March 2010, as part of the Global Health Program. “As a second-year resident, I don’t have any elective time, so I’m using my vacation and education leave,” explains Dr. Ryujin. “I expect to be working with and learning from Kenyan medical personnel, as well as teaching classes to the community and providing direct patient care. I am working with the Matibabu physician, Dr. Fred Okango, to design the curriculum, which may serve as a model for future residents. I’m also planning to bring donated textbooks with me, to start a resource library that residents can access while on rotation at Matibabu.”

Lessons to Learn

“I think it will be great for residents to have the experience of caring for patients without all of the high-tech tools,” notes Dr. Wagner. “Younger physicians are very dependent on scans and are not as strong on physical exams. So, it will be a revelation to them to see how much they can do without advanced technology.”

“Being exposed to cultural differences also enriches their learning experience,” says Ms. Azevedo. “It will make them better doctors – more in tune with the cultural competencies needed to practice medicine in our multicultural environment in Northern California.”

While additional clinical sites for the Global Health Program are being evaluated in Africa, Central America, South America, Vietnam and Japan, opportunities also are being sought closer to home. “We want to make sure that the Global Health Program includes underserved populations every-

where,” notes Ms. Azevedo, “not just outside of the United States.” For more information, visit www.tpmgphysicianed.org/education/global_health

Closer to Home

While international volunteerism is a great choice for some TPMG physicians, others prefer to donate their time and clinical talents without having to bring along their passport. In fact, the desire to provide local volunteer opportunities for surgeons was the impetus for Operation Access, co-founded by **Doug Grey, MD, Vascular Surgery, San Francisco,** in 1994. Since then, Operation Access volunteers have provided approximately 5,300 surgical procedures, specialty care services and diagnostic screenings to low-income, uninsured patients in the Bay Area.

Of the 29 hospitals that currently donate their facilities on Saturday mornings for Operation Access sessions, 11 are Kaiser Foundation Hospitals. In 2009, more than 550 TPMG medical volunteers, including residents, provided surgical care to nearly 700 patients. “With the steady growth of the uninsured, we are predicting both a greater need for our services and an increase in the number of surgeries we will perform in 2010,” reports Dr. Grey.

Community Clinics

Other TPMG physicians, including **John Chuck, MD, Medicine, Davis; Michael Lawson, MD, Gastroenterology, Sacramento;** and **Rose Arellanes, MD, Family Medicine, Roseville,** volunteer at community clinics run by medical students from the University of California, Davis. These include Clinica Tepati, which provides care to the uninsured Spanish-speaking population in Sacramento and Paul Hom

Clinic, which serves the uninsured Asian community.

“Volunteering always brings me great joy, although often I am ambivalent about signing up because I know how challenging it will be to wake up early on Saturday morning to get there,” says Dr. Chuck. “The greatest joy of volunteer precepting at the clinics is seeing the commitment of the pre-med students, medical students and residents, who are just as tired as I am, but are willing to spend their Saturday taking care of people with no insurance. It’s a great way to be inspired by those who are following us in the medical profession, and it rekindles my hope for the future of medical care in America.”

Old Tricks

“I let the medical students do most of the history taking and physical exam. Then they present to me and we discuss the patient’s problem,” explains Dr. Lawson. “Much of the time we see patients with common medical problems, such as diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia.” For fellow subspecialists concerned that their general medicine skills may be too rusty for this type of volunteer work, he responds, “It’s like getting back on the bicycle: it’s what we used to do all the time, and it comes back to you.”

“What is challenging,” Dr. Lawson relates, “is that the clinics don’t have all the gadgets and technical support we are used to in Kaiser Permanente. It’s a bit humbling, but it’s a good experience and it broadens your clinical skills. It reminds me of the way I was taught to practice medicine – that tests aren’t there to rule out, they’re only there to confirm what you think is going on. So, it’s like going back to my roots.”

All About Choice

Physicians are in the unique position of being able to use their medical training and clinical skills when they volunteer; and yet, as **Richard Fleming, MD, Medicine, Vallejo**, points out, “However you donate your time and talent, whether you do so as a clinician, parent, church member or concerned citizen, volunteerism helps weave the fabric of human society into a tighter cloth.”

“And even for those who do not volunteer directly,” Dr. Fleming notes, “their coverage of the hospital and clinic while their colleagues are away helps support volunteerism.” Among TPMG physicians who don’t currently volunteer directly, **Cal Gordon, MD, Pediatrics, and Assistant Physician-in-Chief, San Jose**, believes, “Almost all of them have a latent interest in volunteering.”

KP Cares

Volunteer Website

Physicians who are interested in moving from latent to active volunteer can visit the KP Cares volunteer website (www.kpcares.org).

“We’ve created the website because it meets an expressed need on the part of physicians – to contribute above and beyond their professional role in TPMG, by improving access to quality healthcare for those who don’t have health insurance and providing services in under-resourced areas both domestically and abroad,” says **Sharon Levine, MD, TPMG Associate Executive Director**.

“Our primary goal in creating the website was to make it easier for KP employees, physicians and retirees who want to volunteer to find opportunities that are a good match for their interests, skills and availability,” says **Leslie Koved, LCSW**,

Manager, TPMG Physician

Health. KP Cares features inspiring stories about volunteer activities; a searchable database of projects that are either sponsored by Kaiser Permanente or have been approved by designated local or regional leaders; and resources about volunteerism. “It’s a wonderful tool for physicians to get information about volunteer opportunities and to promote the volunteer opportunities in which they are involved,” notes Dr. Garzon.

New volunteer opportunities in Northern California, in other parts of the US and abroad are continuously being added to this KP Cares website. If motivated volunteers don’t find an instant match, they can ask the system to notify them via e-mail when projects come up that meet the criteria they have included in their online profile.

“I have always wanted to make a contribution by using my medical background abroad, but didn’t feel that I could go until my children were older,” says Dr. Arellanes. “Recently I’ve been looking at various options, but realized I would be scared to go abroad with an organization I don’t know much about. I’m excited about the KP Cares website, and hope I can use it as a resource to make contact with a program that has a connection with Kaiser Permanente.”

Disaster Response

In the wake of the devastating earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, the KP Cares website was invaluable in helping to match physicians and other staff who had necessary skills and a willingness to volunteer with the needs identified by international relief agencies.

“The needs in disasters vary tremendously, and there is a potential for all medical special-

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ties to be useful,” comments Dr. Garzon, who flew to Haiti the day after the earthquake to lead a team from Relief International. “In a traumatic occurrence, like an earthquake, we may need surgeons and anesthesiologists. If it’s an infectious disease outbreak, we may need internists and pediatricians. If it involves displaced people, we may need ob/gyns, because women are delivering babies in tents,” Dr. Garzon continues. “But even subspecialists, such as cardiologists or gastroenterologists, who have an interest in disaster relief work should fill out a profile on the website, because they might be able to serve in a generalist role or some other capacity.”

Serving on Boards

Perhaps less dramatic, but no less important, are opportunities for physicians to share their medical expertise by serving on boards of health-related nonprofit organizations. **Ari Hauptman, MD, Pediatrics, Santa Rosa**, for example, is a member of the Board of Directors for the North Bay Chapter of the American Heart Association. “I’m one of the few doctors on the board, and I’ve been working to address childhood obesity,” he explains. “I’m also involved in a project to get automated external defibrillators at high school sporting events. As a pediatrician, I know that 60 to 100 young athletes die each year of sudden cardiac death in the US, and having defibrillators available could make a big difference.”

Local Champions

In addition to the KP Cares website, each medical center has a team of TPMG and KFH/HP leaders that supports local volunteer activities. “Even with the new website, I think it’s impor-

tant to have a champion at each facility who can serve as a lightning rod for volunteerism,” notes Dr. Chuck, who has that role in the Sacramento Valley.

In Vallejo, Dr. Fleming has been that lightning rod since 2005, when he created the Volunteers in Public Service (VIP’S) program to make it as easy as possible for TPMG physicians to volunteer for a broad range of community service programs, such as Youth and Family Services in Vallejo and Fairfield; Solano County Homeless Clinic in Vallejo; and SafeQuest Solano, a domestic violence shelter.

“Of the 35 physicians who are participating through the VIP’S program, quite a few would not be currently volunteering if not for VIP’S,” notes Dr. Fleming. “It’s not that they wouldn’t want to, but we make it very easy and user friendly for them to volunteer. So, they get all of the rewards of volunteering without having to worry about vetting the agency, making sure their malpractice insurance is in place or arranging their schedule.”

Inspired by Dr. Fleming, Dr. Chuck created a less structured program called Volunteers in Community Service (VICS). “I feel like I’m a bit of a matchmaker,” he comments. “I act as a clearing house for those physicians who either want to promote volunteer activities or are looking for volunteer opportunities.”

“Life is all about fit, and there are certain times in your life when volunteerism dovetails very nicely with your family life and your professional life, and there are other times when it is not a good fit,” notes Dr. Chuck. “I like to keep up the awareness of volunteerism so that if and when the fit is good, physicians are ready to hit the ground running.”

Making a Difference

Matibabu was the perfect fit for **Amanda Schoenberg, MD, Pediatrics, Hayward**, one of the TPMG physicians who accompanied Dr. Wagner on the first trip to Kenya in 2004. “We set up 14 medical camps in 15 days and saw 5,000 patients. I was seeing 80 to 100 kids a day,” Dr. Schoenberg recalls. “I fell in love with the region; I fell in love with the people.”

Since then, Dr. Schoenberg, a founding member of Matibabu, has served on its board and continues to make visits for two to three weeks at a time, twice a year. “Originally, my role was to provide care to as many patients as I possibly could. But once the clinic opened and we hired some Kenyan clinical officers, my role changed,” she explains. “Now it’s more of an academic experience, in which the clinical officers, who are like physician assistants, see patients and I precept them. The major conditions we see in the children are malnutrition, malaria, asthma, worms and upper respiratory illnesses. We also provide preventive care – including well checks for babies and children, handing out mosquito nets and deworming the children.”

“As much as I love seeing patients here at Kaiser Permanente, I really need to feel that I’m making a huge difference for people in Kenya, who otherwise wouldn’t have access to medical care,” she notes. “As a result, Matibabu has allowed me to feel even more satisfied when I’m practicing medicine here in the US.”

Giving and Receiving

“Physicians are sometimes hesitant to take time to do volunteer work, but once they do so, they find that it is inspiring and energizing,” comments Dr. Fleming.

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“It makes them feel better about everything they do as a physician. Seeing how overwhelming the needs in the community are and how much individual physicians can do to help meet those needs is a fulfilling experience.”

In 1999, when Dr. Chuck founded a non-profit to raise money for healthcare-related causes, he named it the Serotonin Surge Charities to reflect its mission “to make people feel great about using their time, talents and wealth to help others in need.” To date, he and his fellow volunteers have made a lot of people feel great, while raising more than \$1 million for their recipient charities through an annual golf tournament, food and wine festival and other events.

Dr. Grey has felt and witnessed the positive impact of physicians donating their medical skills to help people in need. As he relates, “When you leave the hospital after an Operation Access session and you see two people walking out – one a volunteer and one a patient – you can’t tell who is happier.”

“I think volunteering is energizing to physicians and gives them a sense of being part of the larger community,” notes Dr. Gordon. “Also, when we volunteer with colleagues and coworkers, the sense of shared purpose tends to foster positive relationships that carry over to the work environment.”

“There are bonds you develop when you go on a mission trip in a different environment and you’re working together with colleagues to help kids,” says Dr. Rubinstein. “It makes the working relationships the rest of the year unique and special.”

All in the Family

“In the future, I’m hoping to continue to volunteer at Clinica Tapat, as well as to make some trips abroad,” says Dr. Arellanes. “By doing community service, I’m also hoping to introduce my children, who are 6, 9 and 13, to the concept that there are people in the world who are less fortunate than they are and to encourage them to develop a greater sense of empathy.”

Faces of Tomorrow has certainly had that effect on Dr. Rubinstein’s family. Not only has his wife Stephanie, who is a nurse, gone on missions, his three daughters also have done their part – organizing a school project that collected 500 toothbrushes and working with their Girl Scout Troops to make blankets for the children in Ecuador.

His daughter Brooke took things one step further. “We had a party for her tenth birthday, and instead of presents, she asked people to donate to Faces of Tomorrow,” reports Dr. Rubinstein. “She and her friends raised more than \$500. She wasn’t sad about not getting presents; she was excited that she was able to raise the money that would pay for two children to have surgery. It has been really special for my wife and me to be able to give our children the gift of learning how to give back and the value of volunteering.”

TPM forum

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