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Medical mission to Peru

Kaiser medic latest to offer surgical skills

By DAVID RYAN, Register Staff Writer
Monday, July 24, 2006

It's the look on a mother's face that keeps Napa Kaiser Permanente plastic surgeon Dr. Mark Price interested in doing charity medical missions to far-flung parts of the world.

The looks of happiness, awe and gratitude come when parents of children with cleft lips and palates see the deformities undone -- and this in places where modern medical care is hard to come by.

Price's plastic surgery practice at Napa's Kaiser Permanente medical offices usually centers on reversing the negative effects of cancer surgery, whether it be repairing a breast removed by a mastectomy or skin removed because of melanoma.

Every few years he craves the rewards of seeking out even more needy patients in far-flung parts of the world, where a plastic surgeon's talents can be the gift of a lifetime.

Price is not alone. Whether they be surgeons, plastic surgeons or nurses, many local doctors make an effort to carry out missions of charity to impoverished countries. For example, Dr. William McClure, a Napa plastic surgeon, has made dozens of trips, and said he plans to raise money to go on a trip to Laos in September.

Napa plastic surgeon and charity mission veteran Dr. John Zimmerman sits on the board of directors of Interplast, an organization that rounds up qualified medical personnel to make charity medical trips.

Price is one of the most recent Napa doctors to make a charitable trek, this time to rural Ayacucho, Peru, where the Peruvian-American Medical Society estimates there is one doctor for every 12,000 people.

PAMS doctors set up tent offices in the parking lot of the local clinic where they assessed the conditions of scores of patients.

"They had been camped out for days around the block in hopes that we could see them," Price said.

It was Price's fourth mission, but his first to Ayacucho.

"It really is backward, by backward standards," he said.

According to PAMS, Ayacucho is the third-poorest state in Peru, which the United Nations describes as having two different economies -- one for the more modern coastal cities like Lima and one for the mountainous Andes regions, like Ayacucho, populated by native peoples.

United Nations figures show nearly 55 percent of the population doesn't make enough money to meet minimum international food thresholds, while 24 percent live in more extreme poverty.

Ayacucho also has a reputation for bloodshed. It was formerly a hotbed for the Shining Path guerillas and their campaign against the Peruvian government. PAMS said Ayacucho lost 10 percent of its population during the 20-year war between the government and the guerillas.

"It's hard to describe the feeling you get offering these life-changing services to people who need it," Price said, adding conditions like cleft lips and palates are thought to be a sign of evil in native Peruvian communities. "There's a great moment when you hand a mother back her baby with her lip repaired."

Price was able to complete nine surgeries there; as a whole the PAMS mission saw 1,500 patients.

Price said he first started doing charity missions during his Stanford University days when Interplast helped muster doctors and medical students to go on charity missions.

"I'd been bitten by the desire to do these missions by Interplast," he said. "I'd been looking for another mission to go on."

Zimmerman said he's also planning on making another trip, but doesn't know where at the moment. Part of Interplast's goal is also to educate local physicians wherever they conduct their missions.

"We identify a lot of charitably-oriented physicians in those countries that can pick up the (baton) and run with it," he said.

With computerization, Napa physicians can keep track of their Third World patients and advise their doctors on how to treat any complications that arise from surgery.

"We're really dedicated to the safe medical care as if you were having it at Queen of the Valley Hospital, and that can be pretty difficult," Zimmerman said.

But for his part, the rewards of offering top quality care to the world's poor are the big draw to participate in charity missions.

"I plan to keep doing this for the rest of my life," he said.

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