Doctors bring smiles to Bolivian patients

Medical team overcomes government delays, strike

By Jason B. Brimmer
Editor

Operation Smile pairs international teams with local groups to perform surgeries. The Operation Smile organization has plenty of experience in these kinds of expeditions, which it has funded since 1982, but the Bolivian trip ran into unexpected complications.

When the team of 41 doctors, nurses, dentists and other professionals arrived in Bolivia, 55 crates of medical supplies were held up in customs. Operation Smile teams take all of their own supplies, in some cases including equipment, into the countries they visit.

Arriving on Tuesday, the team spent five days screening potential patients, with surgeries to begin on Monday. But the Bolivian minister of health, outgoing from the Bolivian capital of La Paz, refused to grant temporary medical credentials to the group.

"The minister of health doesn't necessarily like to have Americans, foreigners, coming into his country," DeCaire said. By the end of the week, the team had screened 258 people for surgery, but couldn't operate.

"The conditions we worked under were very poor," DeCaire said.

"Screening patients, the process through which physicians evaluate which patients are candidates for surgery, was the hardest part of the trip, Bean said.

"It was something I had to learn," Bean said. "Sometimes we couldn't spend all of the time we'd like to.

One team's speech therapist had extra time with a patient he couldn't help was a trap Bean said he had to avoid.

"You don't want to miss that one person in the back you can help," he said.

"How many times do you get six great plastic surgeons lined up in this town? We wanted to keep them busy," Bean said.

The extra day of screening, with no surgeries, meant that physicians could spend some extra time with patients than usual.

"You open the door and everyone just comes in," said D. Michael Gioffrey Jr. of Brandywine, a dentist resident at Wilmington Hospital.

One of the team's speech therapists found a feeding tube to give the mother, and put the baby on next year's list of patients.

Because of the lack of pediatric facilities, Operation Smile teams usually do not operate on children under one year old.

"When people came, we did what we could to refer them to local care," Bean said. "Sometimes, I think we may have been the only people some of those parents have spoken to about the health of their kids."

The minister of health granted temporary credentials on Tuesday, but the Operation Smile team was now faced with its greatest challenge. Cochabamba was on strike.

Residents of the city were angered by increases in the price of water, DeCaire said.

One woman who worked with DeCaire said she made just $400 a month as a nurse in Bolivia, and the Bolivian trip was now her best chance to improve the lives of her patients.

"It's more than just physically doing the cases. It's hoping to change a community to have a commitment to do volunteer work," Bean said.

"One of the great things you get out of these missions is not only do you meet the surgical patients, but the actual patients. The people who are touched by Operation Smile are the important thing is that we improve the Operation Smile's Bolivian expedition.

"There are always people helping us out," Bean said.

"One of the great things you get out of these missions is not only do you meet a great team to work with, you do the same thing with people in the countries you go to," DeCaire said. "And that's just on top of the fulfillment of helping children and seeing them smile. It's definitely satisfying."

In fact, Gioffrey is leaving on his fifth Operation Smile trip in June.

This was Bean's first expedition.

"I went with a little bit of hesitancy. Are we doing any good?" he said. "For two weeks I was able to practice medicine without the managed care, consent forms and insurance paper work. Just, how do I help this child? I came back with a great deal of energy. I think you have the chance to touch a lot of lives."