

From my perspective

I have just returned from eastern Africa, where I visited rural and missionary hospitals in Kenya and the southern Sudan. The latter area, of course, has been in the news a great deal the last several months due to the humanitarian efforts under way to salvage the lives of thousands of displaced Sudanese people who have borne the strife of many years of civil war.

While in Africa, I had the opportunity to observe first-hand surgeons working in primitive operating rooms and performing lifesaving procedures. Orthopaedic injuries, ravaging infections, neurological problems, and obstetrical catastrophes were commonplace among the patients in these hospitals.

To see what these volunteer physicians were able to accomplish, despite the austere working conditions and mismanagement of the countries' resources, was truly an eye-opening experience. I thought I would share just a glimpse of that world with you by including some of the photos from my trip on the following pages.

The enthusiasm and esprit de corps that the American surgeons and the staffs they had assembled demonstrated was unwavering and contagious. Their minds were not focused on the reimbursement, regulatory, and liability concerns that so frequently vex surgeons. Rather, they showed sincere and genuine humanitarianism in their efforts to help these unfortunate patients who otherwise would have no choices and no opportunities to receive necessary care.

This experience reinforced my belief that the profession of surgery and the people who compose it have so much to offer to the world. Our years of training and understanding of diseases give us the power and privilege to affect the lives of other humans.

Discouragement at home

So often in my travels I am besieged by surgeons expressing the discouragement they feel because they believe our health care system has presented them with nothing but broken dreams and promises. Their upset is the result of a health care system in this country that is becoming extremely regulated and that is often managed by people outside of our profession. In addition, they know that their public image has been eroded and that the public—to some extent—believes that they are more interested in the bottom line than they are in taking care of people. These surgeons are an-



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gry about the present and extremely pessimistic about the future. They complain about the state of the surgical profession and predict its unraveling. They would never recommend medicine, much less surgery, to young people as a career choice.

It is sad to see professional surgeons who are unhappily delivering health care services. However, while I can certainly understand and relate to their grievances, I also realize that all professions have problems and are feeling the effects of outside influences.

Operation Giving Back

Although the practice of medicine has not been tainted for all members of our community, a sizable number of physicians and surgeons continually express deep-rooted frustration with their choice of profession. What can we do to improve the morale of surgeons in this country and enhance



their public image? Why not provide a focus on the reason why so many of us became surgeons in the first place—to serve humanity?

There are a number of opportunities in this country and around the world through which surgeons can get involved in missionary programs similar to the one I described earlier. These projects can help surgeons give freely of their skills and knowledge to sustain the lives of people who often have nowhere else to turn. Our participation in such activities reminds us of why we decided to choose medicine as a career.

To help surgeons discover new opportunities in this area, the ACS Board of Governors' Committee on Socioeconomic Issues has initiated a program called Operation Giving Back. Based on the vision of the committee's Immediate Past-Chair,

Andrew Warshaw, MD, FACS, from Boston, MA, and current Chair Robert Stephens, MD, FACS, of Scottsdale, AZ, Operation Giving Back will serve as a comprehensive resource for surgeons who would like to learn more about domestic and international volunteer opportunities. This program will reach out not only to surgeons but to volunteer agencies, corporate and private philanthropies, and policymakers.

Many surgeons already are committed to volunteerism, and we plan to develop an accurate profile of these individuals and their efforts. This information will enable us to effectively support public and legislative policies aimed at encouraging surgeons to provide more volunteer services. These initiatives will help us to protect surgeons who lend their skills and talents to underserved



populations in this country. Additionally, this volunteer profiling system will allow us to better define the broad scope of surgeon-volunteer activities, whether they are conducted within an individual's local community, regionally, or outside the U.S.

Restoring hope

Many of us chose a career in surgery because we wanted to serve humanity. Operation Giving Back, which will be spearheaded by Kathleen M. Casey, MD, FACS, Newport, RI, will allow the College to develop a Web site and a registry that will assist surgeons who are interested in volunteering their services to quickly match their interests with where they are most needed in this country as well as in other areas of the world.

We need to restore a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in ourselves and in our surgical colleagues. I believe that this program, as well as our continued effort to improve the health care system in this country, will do much to make surgeons feel good about themselves and this profession.

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If you have comments or suggestions about this or other issues, please send them to Dr. Russell at fmp@facs.org.