

Missions of mercy

Every three months, a Baptist Hospital surgical team carrying several dozen 70-pound duffle bags stuffed with medical supplies travels to a village in Haiti to operate on people in desperate need of medical care.

It's a joint undertaking of Baptist Health and two other not-for-profit groups—Living Hope Haiti Christian Mission, co-founded by Baptist Hospital Board Chairman Calvin Babcock, and Double Harvest, another Christian mission that built a medical clinic with two new, but underused, operating rooms.

"We've got world-class surgeons, nurses and staff who are the best there is," Mr. Babcock said. "These Baptist Hospital folks are the most incredible, hardworking, kind and loving people that I've ever had the opportunity to work with. It just amazes me."

Baptist Health committed to donating its staff and supplies for four surgical missions each year to Croix des Bouquets, less than an hour outside the capital of Port-au-Prince.

The hospital surgeons, nurses and other operating room staff work 16-hour days to do as many surgeries as possible—including hysterectomies and other gynecologic procedures for women, hernia

repairs for men, and cleft palate and other deformity corrections for children. Though many of these operations would be routine by U.S. standards, in Haiti the patients' conditions have grown complicated from decades without treatment. Even though the OR rooms are the best Haiti has to offer, no imaging equipment or other high-tech machines are available to diagnose problems and help guide treatment.

"We come across men and women in their 70s who have never had any medical care," said Michele Ryder, R.N., a surgical nurse and Baptist Hospital vice president who organizes and leads the trips, along with nurse anesthetist Aly Kendon and OR nurse Elaine Desmarais, R.N.

"These people are in such need and these are high-risk procedures," Ms. Ryder said. "You don't know what's going to happen and you say a lot of prayers. Hopefully,

we can make their lives a little easier."

Last fall, the surgical team did an eight-day mission, performing about 20 hysterectomies, 40 general procedures and 10 operations for children. The next trip was set for the end of February. Baptist Health doctors who have donated their time and expertise in Haiti include Drs. Anthony Gonzalez, Michael Canning, Cosme Gomez, Robert Puig, Manuel Peñalver, Joel Levin and Victor Gonzalez.

Ms. Desmarais, a five-year Baptist Hospital employee who is involved in many local volunteer activities, said she would do surgical missions full time if she could. "It's a humbling experience and it's extremely fulfilling to know that these people wouldn't have the care they're getting without us going there," she said. "It's a real spiritual thing and it brings us all closer."

Mr. Babcock co-founded Living Hope Haiti in 2002 with the construction of an elementary school. The mission has grown to include four schools, three medical clinics and adult literacy classes, in addition to the surgical team and other projects. For more information, visit www.livinghopehaiti.com.

— Patty Shillington



Baptist Hospital nurse anesthetist Jorge Valdez helps keep a patient smiling and upbeat before surgery.



Patients rest after surgery in this overflow post-op area.



Martha Sussenberger scrubs surgical instruments.