

'Flying' Napa docs take wings to help the poor in Central America

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A worried mother carried her ailing son on an old bus across bumpy, dusty roads for six hours so he could be checked at a free medical clinic offered by the Flying Doctors last month in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

It was the first trip with the medical group for Dr. Carl Speizer, an emergency room doctor at Queen of the Valley Hospital. Another Napan, dentist Dr. Adrian Fenderson, is a veteran of more than 40 similar missions to Mexico and Central America over the past 24 years.

The Flying Doctors, also known as Los Medicos Voladores, are a diverse group of American medical professionals and volunteers who, since they started in 1974, have flown to remote areas of Mexico and Central America to bring their expertise to low income people who might otherwise not get any medical or dental care.

Speizer said the experience was rewarding, but at times frustrating. After checking the young boy, the doctor concluded the patient had significant anemia and possibly lead toxicity.

"He needed a work-up," the Napa physician said.

But the woman had to get back with her other children, left alone miles away, and had no resources. Later, he learned, the nearest medical lab did not have the ability to check lead levels.

Speizer had to settle for treating the lad for amebiasis, an infectious disease caused by parasitic microorganisms.

He wonders what will happen to the boy.

The two Napans took their years of medical experience and the good wishes of dozens of Napans on their flight to Guatemala. When they arrived in Guatemala City, they were bused to Antigua. From there, it was another bus ride up the mountains to Quetzaltenango, at 9,000 foot elevation. "So we were huffing and puffing up and down those stairs," Fenderson said.

The dentist's caseload was heavy, but similar to those of past trips with the Flying Doctors. "I did extractions, a few root canals to save some teeth on younger people, and restorations," he said. "About everything you can imagine in dentistry that can be done in one day."

Fenderson worked with two other dentists and a dental student.

He said he found surprisingly good conditions at the clinic. "Nice floors, clean," he said.

They had to set up their own equipment, including a donated dental chair. Otherwise, they used makeshift chairs for the patients.

This was a tremendous improvement. On many of his prior trips to rural Mexican barrios, Fenderson had to create patient tables by laying wooden doors across saw-horses in rooms with dirt floors.

It took about two hours to set up shop. The biggest challenge was activating a compressor. "I can't do anything without compressed air," he said.

Besides patient tables and clean instruments, Fenderson also brought a "boom box" and a cache of old Beatles music. "I played oldies," he said. "Played them loud and had fun down there. Gotta have music or I can't work," he joked. "And a fan to keep me cooled down."

He is preparing a slide show of the trip to show to the Kiwanis Club of Greater Napa, which donated \$1,000 for the expedition. Those funds, combined with a donation from Rotary of Sonora, were used for pharmaceutical purchases. In all, the medical team had about \$3,000 donated from various sources.

A total of 19 medical personnel from across the United States participated in the clinic. All are members of the Central American Chapter of Flying Doctors.

Speizer's command of the Spanish language proved invaluable. Other translation was provided by a local volunteer.

The group used the services of medical students from the University of San Carlos in Guatemala, who triaged patients and assisted the doctors and dentists.

Speizer said most of the patients -- the team saw 2,300 in three days -- were not acute cases; many needed further testing. He saw a woman in her 70s who complained of abdominal pain. "I felt she needed to have some imaging such as a cat scan. She had pain for eight days ... but chose not to go to the hospital. I felt she should have gone," he said.

Although there is a small hospital in the area, resources are limited.

The Napans said the Guatemalan government was open to help from "the outside" and presented all of the medics with certificates of appreciation before they closed shop.

"It was gratifying to take care of the patients," Speizer said. "You are very busy, and you get a sense the people are very appreciative, and respectful. It feels good to be able to give something to somebody who has a need and appreciates it."

He confided it is nice to work without fear of a malpractice lawsuit.

Fenderson said he looks forward to his out-of-country missions. "I do it because it's an adventure and it is pure dentistry," he said. "There are no appointments, no records to check, no forms to fill out, no insurance to check. It's just, 'How can I help you? OK, sit down and we'll fix it.'"

