

ABHS foot/ankle specialist braves risks of world's murder capital to care for poor

Narendra Patel, D.P.M., has a simple answer when asked why he participates once a year in a medical mission to Honduras, a nation plagued by poverty, corruption and the world's highest murder rate.

"It's the gratitude," says Patel, Chief of Podiatric Foot and Ankle Surgery at Alexian Brothers Medical Center in Elk Grove Village, Ill.

Patel, who completed a weeklong trip to Honduras in early August, says the impoverished Hondurans whom he treats "want to make sure you know they are very happy with the fact you helped them."

One patient whose leg Dr. Patel helped straighten during his first trip to Honduras in July 2012 is so grateful that he continually returns to the mission with small gifts of gratitude, such as wooden key rings hand-carved with the names of mission doctors.

"The amount of gratefulness these people have is amazing," Dr. Patel says. "There is no amount of monetary reward that would equate to the amount of gratitude they give."

Patel serves as a medical missionary with Our Great Shepherd's Outreach Ministry, Inc., a nonprofit organization founded 16 years ago by David Cavallaro, D.P.M., of Oklahoma City. Dedicated to providing free foot/ankle trauma care and surgeries for poor Hondurans, the ministry conducts two mission trips each year to the Central American nation, where many people either can't afford specialized foot/ankle care or must wait a long time to receive it. It's common to see poor Hondurans with deformed feet and ankles and mobility problems caused by untreated fractures, Patel says. "We're just there to do what needs to be done in one procedure that can get that person to some degree of normal life function," he says.



Narendra Patel, D.P.M., examines the foot of a young patient during a medical mission to Honduras this past summer.

The ministry collaborates with Jose Samara, M.D., Director of Leonardo Martinez Hospital in San Pedro Sula, a city in the northwest corner of Honduras that is known as the murder capital of the world. Gang violence fueled by drug trafficking has driven the city's annual homicide rate to 169 per 100,000 people, the highest of any city on Earth. Patel and other mission volunteers rely on the hospital's medical students and residents to guide them safely through the city.

Sumara makes the hospital's four operating rooms, nursing staff and anesthesiologist available to Cavallaro and a revolving cast of other surgeons, including Patel and three other U.S. doctors. "All we need to do is bring in supplies and our expertise," Patel says. "Whoever comes to the clinic, we will see them."

During their latest mission, Patel, Cavallaro and two other volunteer surgeons saw 100 patients and performed 28 surgeries. They ranged from a simple toe procedure "to re-breaking a leg and straightening

it out," Patel says.

Mo Patel, a certified surgical technologist who serves as Dr. Patel's surgical assistant, has accompanied him on his three mission trips to Honduras and plays a "very important role," Dr. Patel says.

The medical team also benefited this past summer from a donation of equipment and supplies from Stryker. Stephanie Sulentic, a Stryker sales representative, and Adlei DaSilva, Director, AGD Medical Distribution, played integral roles on the latest mission trip, Dr. Patel says.

The trip included "a bit of a scare" when gunmen killed five people in a dinner-time attack at a restaurant where the mission team had been planning to eat before changing its plans and going elsewhere at the last minute, Dr. Patel says. "We got lucky," he says.

Despite such risks, Dr. Patel plans to return with the mission to San Pedro Sula every July. "Who else is going to help these people?" he asks.