

Annual mission trip to Haiti takes on new urgency

Indianapolis Star

January 21, 2010

Ask the Doctor: Shari Rudavsky

Terry Ihnat is a general surgeon with the Community Health Network.

Question: You have made nine medical mission trips to Haiti. What have you heard about what's going on there now?

Answer: In Port-au-Prince, it's just havoc. Somebody forwarded an e-mail from one of our interpreters, and his house is gone. He has no food, no water. He's not injured, but he's getting weaker. The lady who got the e-mail pointed out that if he could make it to where there's U.S. forces, he might get sustenance.

The church we work out of is in the mountains, six hours outside Port-au-Prince. The church had minor damage, but the priest's house is unlivable. In Port-au-Prince, the place we stay on the way in and out is damaged, but the kitchen is functional. They're using the soccer field next door as a hospital, and they're doing amputations there.

Q: What do you usually do when you go?

A: St. Thomas Aquinas Church is twinning with the parish in the mountains. One week every year, they send a medical team. We set up a clinic in the church and do general medicine.

We take care of normal, everyday headaches, stomachaches, lot of aches and pains. If anything acute comes up, we don't have any lab, any X-ray. Every once in a while, we'll see some malaria.

We have seen kids who have come through with symptoms of years of breathing difficulties, and it turns out that they had a heart murmur, and eventually, we were able to get them to the States for surgery.

Q: Are you the only doctors they see?

A: It's pretty much the case. There's a nurse who comes through and, maybe, checks blood pressure and follows up, but as far as real medical care, we're about the only ones that they see. Some of our patients will walk for hours to get there. Sometimes they leave the night before.

Q: When is your next trip?

A: We leave Feb. 12. It's a previously scheduled trip. We probably will stay in Port Au Prince. Normally, to prepare, we start gathering supplies, medicines, sutures. We're in the process of doing that right now. It's kind of business as usual, but I'm sure that will alter if the mission needs to change.

Q: Is there a danger that you wouldn't go?

A: The plan is to go if the planes are flying.

Q: Personally, what are you preparing yourself to handle?

A: By next month, a lot of the acute stuff will be sorted out. We're probably going to see the aftermath of sub-acute problems, infection, wounds, plus a lot of the normal things. There's going to be a lot of people in renal failure, just from lack of water.

Q: Where will you stay?

A: I think they will have us living in the soccer field if we stay there.

Q: Will you have access to running water?

A: My guess is not, because it runs off an electric pump.

It's a fascinating place, but this is going to a very different scene this year.