



remarks

Medical Ambassadors A retired surgeon finds his calling providing volunteer care for remote communities at home and abroad.

BY GARRETT H. DOTSON, MD



"If you do this Gary, it will change your life."

These simple words

from Stan Brock, the founder of [Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps](#), launched me into a post-retirement career that I have never regretted. Years before, I had survived work-related Hepatitis B with bleeding esophageal varices which led to a distal splenorenal shunt. I experienced a miraculous resolution of the disease without medications, allowing me to return to practice for an additional fourteen years. Since then, I have looked for an

outlet to pay back for my recovery.

Four months after the conversation with Stan, my wife, Louise, and I were part of a jeep and truck convoy that rolled through the dusty villages and small towns of central India, dodging roving cows, carts pulled by water buffalo and oxen, and thousands of people on bicycles, on motor scooters, and on foot. We were part of an American and Canadian medical team led by Stan Brock himself. At our final destination, a small mining town, we

were greeted by throngs of cheering people and showered with flowers and gifts before being honored at an elaborate opening ceremony. Then, at the abandoned hospital where we would be working, we began selecting patients who needed surgery the most from the long lines of those waiting and hoping. We soon learned that some of them had traveled far and had been waiting for days to see us. When we had to give priority to those who were the most in need, emotional outbursts and crying from those

who were turned away were common because they didn't understand our triage system. I sometimes wanted to cry with them. Louise adopted a group of women with burn scars and lobbied for their surgery because deformities of this type make them unmarriageable in the Indian culture.

The following day, the team went to work. The family practitioners and veterinarians fanned out into the countryside to see their patients, and the surgeons began operating, assisted by volunteer Indian anesthesiologists. Over the next five days, the ophthalmologists did 150 cataract operations, while Stan ran the eye clinic where hundreds of people

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These images are from Dr. Dotson's most recent trip to Aishalton, Guyana.

ABOVE, Louise Dotson and Cathy Tilton teach a class at Aishalton School.

RIGHT, the nurses had a makeup session with the girls of the village.

were fitted with donated eyeglasses. Because the plastic surgeons devoted most of their time to cleft lip repairs, the general surgeons performed the burn scar surgery and skin grafting along with an array of other operations.

After five days, we were bid farewell at another elaborate ceremony before the team moved to a second location about a hundred miles away. We were forced to leave behind more than a few devastated patients who didn't get their surgery because we simply ran out of time. One of them, a twelve-year-old girl with a cleft lip, had been befriended by Louise. When this child appeared at the second location and was given priority to have her surgery, I suspected that my wife had given her money for the bus ticket, something that Louise still denies.

During the long trip home, there was time to reflect on what we had done. We understood that it was only "a drop in the bucket." But to those few hundred patients who had their lives changed by the care provided by our group, it was much more than that.

A year later, we returned to India, the Rajasthan northeastern district, an en-

chanting land of sand dunes and camels. This was an eye-opening experience for our younger daughter who worked as a volunteer. It has been two years since our last visit to that country, and I miss it. Every time I pick up my latest issue of *National Geographic*, I am reminded that India is a photographer's dream, an explosion of exotic colors and shadows. And then I remember the friendly and polite people who are physically poor, but spiritually rich.

After the trips to India, I was hooked on Remote Area Medical. In the last two years I have helped Stan organize two projects in the Appalachian Mountains of my native Kentucky, and have headed up a similar project for the poor in my home county here in Florida. Typically, a public school facility is used for a weekend of work. Using portable equipment, volunteer dentists provide fillings and extractions. Eye physicians perform examinations while opticians, using a portable van, generate lenses for the donated glasses frames. Free mammograms, Pap smears, and general medical examinations are also provided.

Stan Brock has strong ties to Guyana,

South America since, as a young man, he lived and worked there as a cowboy on the world's largest ranch. During this time, he became a bush pilot, a wildlife expert, and a devoted friend of the native Wapishana Indians. After Stan left Guyana, he co-starred with Marlon Perkins on the television series "Wild Kingdom" before founding Remote Area Medical in 1985. Since then, he has taken medical teams to Guyana many times. When he asked me to organize a surgical team and set up an operating room in a small and remote southern Guyana village, I knew it would be a challenge, but couldn't resist a chance to learn about a new culture. With the help of some very devoted volunteers and the [Rotary Club](#), we moved surgical instruments, supplies, and anesthesia and sterilization equipment southward by boat, plane, and truck. Most of this equipment had been donated by U.S. hospitals and manufacturers.

When Stan first flew me over the green and mountainous rain forest and out over the vast savannah grasslands, I suddenly understood why he loved this place. Aishalton village is a step back in time with seven hundred beautiful and peaceful peo-

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ABOVE LEFT, Dr. Dotson and the surgical team finish a patient's surgery.

ABOVE, the surgical team poses in front of Aishalton Hospital.

ABOVE RIGHT, Louise Dotson gives a young surgical patient a toy.

LEFT, Dr. Dotson, Tilton and Sharon Blackburn prepare to leave Guyana.

ple living in grass-thatched huts and scratching out a meager living by farming. But they are in a time of crucial transition. The older generation is trying desperately to hold on to their traditions and culture, while the younger generation is discovering computers and the Internet. Aishalton has no electricity, running water, or telephone service. A few places have generator power. At our primitive hospital facility, volunteers established our own generator power and running water for the operating room and shower.

Because I knew there were no physicians within three hundred miles, I wasn't surprised when patients began emerging from the jungle after walks of several days. The Ram air ambulance aircraft flew 102 missions and airlifted seventy patients. The surgical, dental, ophthalmologic, and veterinary teams did many operations during the eight days we were there. Our team returned from our second trip in November tired, but already talking about

doing it again. When I am asked by friends, "What's it like to be back in the real world?" I can only smile and tell them truthfully, "This isn't the real world. I've just been to the real world."

I believe that we physicians have a thirst to practice medicine in its purest form, free from the worry of charging patients and fighting with third person payers, and free from lawyers and concerns about liability. At times in the world of American medicine, it seems that this Shangri La world is something we can only dream about. As for me, I have already walked through the mountain pass and discovered the closest thing to a medical Shangri La, and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve. I don't know how many more of these adventures are on the horizon, but if Stan calls and says, "Let's go to . . .," I'll probably be right there alongside him.

Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps is supported by private donations from

individuals. Because it has no religious affiliation, I have had the opportunity to work with people of all faiths. Volunteers pay all their own travel expenses and no one receives a salary. All donated money is used to buy medical supplies and fuel for transportation. Further information about Remote Area Medical can be obtained at www.ramusa.org ■

*After graduating from the University of Kentucky School of Medicine, H. Garrett Dotson received his surgical training at Tulane University. Following service in the Navy Medical Corps, he practiced surgery in Florida for twenty-four years. He retired four years ago, partly to devote more time to volunteer humanitarian efforts and writing. He recently published his first novel, *The Governor of Peter Creek*. E-mail him at mardigras@aol.com or visit his Web site at www.hgarrettdotson.com.*

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