

Medical team returns from relief mission to India

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A four-member medical team from Livonia found themselves up against 25,000 deaths, thousands more injuries and utter destruction in earthquake-ravaged India.

Upon reflection, members of the St. Mary Mercy Hospital contingent wonder if they made a difference.

"We didn't make a big wave in the ocean," said Barbara Dowel, St. Mary Mercy Emergency Center manager. "We did help in a small way."

Dr. Ash Gokli, Mary Greer, a

registered nurse, and Dowel returned recently from a two-week medical mission in western India, the site of a 7.9-magnitude earthquake Jan. 26. Dr. B. Babu Paidipaty, Department of Medicine chairman, came back a day earlier.

Prior to the trip, they braced themselves for what to expect. However, that could not prepare them for the destruction and human misery they witnessed.

After a 20-hour flight from Detroit to Ahmedabad, they immediately started treating casualties.

Care plan

Paidipaty remained in Ahmedabad to assist in an overrun hospital where trauma patients — many of whom needed amputations — remained on the floor because there were not enough beds.

Gokli, Greer and Dowel joined another physician and traveled to Bhuj, one of the worst hit areas.

There, they had to contend with unsanitary conditions, unwelcoming terrain and what can be best described as primitive medical equipment. One surgical table consisted of two filing cabinets pushed together, while bricks were used for traction.

Patients lay on dirt floors in tents surrounded by waste and besieged by flies.

"They were lying on the ground in dirt," Gokli said. "How do you clean wounds in those conditions?"

In villages, the team found people who sat with blank stares in front of where their houses once stood. They did not want to leave because they still had valuables amid the rubble.

With every disintegrated structure, there was a story.

They met one man who lost his wife and 3-year-old daughter, but somehow, his 20-day-old

infant manage to survive. Another woman remained trapped for 48 hours and eventually lost both legs and an arm.

"She asked, 'Why did you save me?'" Dowel said.

Another tremor

Like those who were left homeless, team members slept in makeshift tents. They also experienced a second quake, which registered 5.8 on the Richter scale.

"There was no mistake about it," said Greer, who lives in Livonia. "You had the sensation of falling. I felt nauseous."

Said Gokli: "It felt like two

railway engines colliding. You felt this great big jolt."

As medical professionals, they encountered their own frustrations.

Instead of taking medicine as prescribed to stave off infections, people would only ingest one pill and try to save the rest, Gokli said.

The team offered to pay 3,000 Rupees (\$64 U.S.) so an elderly man could travel 150 kilometers (93 miles) to receive needed cataract surgery. He refused to go, not wanting to leave his village.

Nerves became frayed after awhile.

"One day, after we came back from being at the camps, all four of us were on edge," Dowel said. "We were all stressed out."

"Perhaps we didn't know how to handle what we had seen."

Inspiration

The resilience of many earthquake survivors hearten them; Despite seemingly insurmountable hardships, no one heard any complaints, Dowel said.

"The kids really pulled at your heart strings," said Greer, who is a mother. "They were still happy and carefree despite having to live in a tent."

At one point, they traveled 60 kilometers (31 miles) to get candy so they could hand it out to children in the village.

Team members appreciate contributions people have made locally to the relief effort.

As of Wednesday, \$40,000 had been raised, which will buy medical supplies, clothing and blankets. Disease is the biggest threat to survivors, they said.

Hospital officials are still deciding whether to send a follow-up team.

Hospital staff and people in Livonia should be proud to have had a role in such a global effort, Gokli said.

"I think the world has come together in a time of need," Gokli said.

People who want to contribute to the India earthquake relief effort may send monetary contributions to: St. Mary Mercy Foundation, 36475 Five Mile Road, Livonia 48154. Phone Sherri Fletcher in the fund development office at (734) 655-2121.

Students reach out to quake victims

Beechview Elementary School students, parents and staff members contributed a substantial amount of money and supplies for victims of the recent India earthquake, said parent Rashmi Wadehra.

"Our relief efforts (were) a big success," said Wadehra, noting that Beechview collected 318 boxes filled with orthopedic surgical/medical supplies (prosthetics for limbs), surgical and medical equipment and supplies, food, beddings and medicines. The estimated value of the boxes was \$500,000.

Wadehra said the items were loaded onto Air India on Friday, Feb. 16, and the first of (approximately 3 shipments) arrived in India on Saturday, Feb. 17.

In addition, about \$850 was generated by Beechview, including \$200 from the student council and \$500 from the Yoga Association of Greater Detroit (of which a Beechview employee is a member).

Meanwhile, the relief efforts for India are continuing. "If anyone is interested in helping the victims of the earthquake, we are accepting cash donations that are IRS tax deductible," Wadehra explained.

Anyone interested in donating to the cause can contact Wadehra at (248) 442-1155.

Other schools helped too

Students and families of both Alameda Early Childhood Center and Longere Elementary School also contributed to the Indian earthquake relief effort.

At Alameda, a total of \$805 was collected with the help of the center's staff, PTA, diversity and multi-cultural committees.

The Longere Student Council, under the leadership of teacher Tim Prince, spearheaded a collection drive that netted \$1,000. Most of that money was collected over a two-day span. Parent Sharon Russell and Metrobank in Farmington contributed to the cause, said Principal Bill Smith.



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