

## A Young Doctor's Haiti Relief Experience

Written by Amy Huang

Wednesday, 31 March 2010 14:52

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I finally have some time to sit down and process my thoughts on the incredible 10 days I spent in Haiti, but it's so hard to know where to begin...

Chaos was my first impression of Haiti. As I waited for my ride from the airport, I could see hundreds of people crowding the gated exit of the airport, waiting for a chance to "help" the travelers with their luggage to earn a few bucks. They are all shouting and waving their hands, hoping you would look at them, would show them the compassion (or money) they need. Every few minutes, a UN tank would drive by, which quieted the crowd for several seconds. Military helicopters hovered above. It was like a scene from a war movie. At first, it was hard to imagine any hope for this country. Two months after the devastating earthquake, rubbles still blocked the streets and horrible stench filled the air; people were living inside plastic tarps and ragged sheets on any flat surface they could find. But over the next 10 days, I would begin to see some light for Haiti.

### **Inside the tents of Tzu Chi medical service**

From the airport, I was driven directly to the National Stadium of Haiti (Stade Sylvio Cator), which has turned into a tent area that shelters over 800 families on the field and another 1200+ families around the stadium. I walked into the tents our medical team had set up and was just shocked at how many people were lined up, waiting for the chance to be seen. These tents became my office for the next 10 days. As a doctor, I was privileged to be able to interact with many families and learn their stories. A few patients really stood out...

My first day there, a mom brought in her 8 year old daughter who had fainted (I would later be accustomed to this as on average 4 to 5 people would pass out each day from the heat and dehydration. They usually recover after some fluids and candy). The girl was better after some juice, but it was the mom whose story stayed with me. While waiting for her daughter to recover, the mom became very teary. She said her other daughter was killed in the earthquake. Now she lives in one of the tents inside the stadium. She volunteers for the stadium everyday, because she wants to do something for her people. She told us she's currently pregnant. When we asked her how many months is she, she answered: eleven!! She then said the last time she felt the baby move was on the day of the earthquake. Two of the doctors tried to listen for a fetal heartbeat but heard nothing. We didn't want to break the bad news to her, so we sent her to the hospital for an ultrasound. A few hours later she came back and said that nothing was done because the hospital doesn't have an ultrasound. This is how poor Haiti is – no access to even the simplest ultrasound machine to provide the most basic prenatal care.

One day, a mom brought in a 12 day old boy to the clinic. She said that she found the baby 12 days ago by the toilets inside the stadium. His umbilical cord was still fresh at that time, so she knew he had just been born. Already with 3 kids of her own and now barely surviving in one of the tents, this mom took the baby home and started caring for him. She couldn't afford enough formula, so she had to feed him some water from time to time. Fortunately, when I saw the baby he was strong and well, with only a mild eye infection. We had the mom bring him back

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everyday for a week so we could check on them. Mom was always the first or second person in line outside our tent every morning! The mom is an inspiration to us all. She told us that the baby is a gift from God, an angel to for her family.



### **The 500 gram baby**

The most shocking case I saw in Haiti had to be the 500 gram baby girl who was born at home, around 28 weeks of gestation. By the time we saw her, she was already 24 days old. It was a miracle she was still alive. She was so frail, so thin; every one of her ribs protruding like sticks. Her head was massive from internal bleeding, a common yet preventable complication of prematurity. Mom's nipple was too big for her tiny mouth, so it was not surprising she was so malnourished. We immediately transported the mom and baby to the University Hospital of Haiti (l'Hopital General). They didn't have the capacity to care for her, but they were able to arrange a flight for both Mom and baby to be treated at Miami Children's Hospital. I wonder what has become of them...

My last day at the free clinic, I saw a severely dehydrated baby who was only 20 days old. The baby was basically in shock when I saw him. Because I had to transport him to the hospital, I was able to experience Haiti's hospital first-hand. Again, we went to l'Hopital General. I was stunned to see this medical center has turned into one big field hospital. Tents filled the place, with hundreds and thousands of people crowding together, just waiting for doctors. Their pediatric ward is a big tent, crammed with stretchers - there were kids with all sorts of diseases and injuries all together under the tent. There is no such thing as infection control or privacy. It was quite a sight. Again, like something out of a war movie.



### **Class all canceled, college students as volunteers**

Amongst all the heartbreaking scenes came a sense of hope when I saw many local Haitian volunteers helping each other. Many of the volunteers are college students, their classes canceled indefinitely as their universities were destroyed by the earthquake. Through the interactions with Tzu Chi volunteers, their inner compassion and love were ignited. While walking out of l'Hopital General, Stayder, the volunteer translator who accompanied me said: "I think I am really blessed." As a volunteer, Stayder walked through a Haitian hospital for the first time in his life. He witnessed the suffering and pain there and reflected on how fortunate he is. He told me he must do more to help people, because he has a healthy body and able mind. This is Tzu Chi's spirit in action: not just to provide material goods or medical care, but to bring love and care to the people, to inspire their love, so they will help themselves and help each other.

It has been weird being back in the U.S. I have a deep and inexplicable sense of gratitude for everything around me - for the clean air, safe tap water, hot shower. But with this sense of

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gratitude also comes a sense of sadness, because even though we are blessed and fortunate, I know how wasteful and extravagant we are. Indirectly, we are making the situations in Haiti (and other countries like it) worse...

How I wish I could have seen one more patient, interacted with one more local volunteer, and taken one more picture. This trip has changed my life in more ways than I can describe. I must keep this love and gratitude with me as I settle back into the "normal" life.



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