

## Serving the Underserved Here and Abroad - A Role Model for Future Primary Care Clinicians

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At the 2010 IPHCA Annual Leadership Conference, held October 20 – 22, Gregg Stoner, M.D., chief medical officer at Heartland Community Health Clinic in Peoria, Illinois, was awarded the Primary Health Care Clinician Devotion Award for his 23-year commitment to providing quality care and reducing health disparities for patients. In addition to his service here in the United States, Dr. Stoner travels to Haiti to serve as the leader of medical missions to one of the poorest countries in the world each year. In Haiti, four out of five people are living in poverty, and it is estimated that over 60 percent of the population is unemployed. Most people sustain themselves through work in agriculture (the main export crop is coffee) or factory work which pays less than \$3 per day, on average.

It has been one year since January 12, 2010—the date a massive earthquake struck Haiti, about 10 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, the country's capital. The earthquake, the worst in the region in more than 200 years, killed an estimated 230,000 people, injured 300,000 and left one million homeless. It is estimated that 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings collapsed or were severely damaged in the quake.

For the past six years, Dr. Stoner has visited Haiti as a Friends of the Children of Haiti (FOTCOH) volunteer. During his most recent trip to Cyvadier, Haiti, in March 2010, Dr. Stoner served as the team leader of the General Practice Team, directing the care provided by a team of individuals that included professionals and laypersons who worked side-by-side as members of general practice teams to treat people who—without these services—would go without any medical care. Dr. Stoner's team included six physicians (including one family medicine resident), three nurse practitioners, two pharmacists, a dentist, a physical therapist, a medical student and five non-medical personnel.

The FOTCOH project, which is based in Peoria, enlists the assistance of volunteers from across the United States that work to address the medical needs of Haitians in the city of Cyvadier. The organization provides medical supplies, diagnostic services and logistical support. New volunteers work with experienced FOTCOH personnel in a variety of roles, such as filling prescriptions, cooking meals

and comforting frightened patients who are undergoing treatment at the clinic. FOTCOH made its first medical mission in 1985, treating 550 patients. During the years that followed, the organization has taken several medical mission trips every year. In more recent years, each two-week mission trip serves approximately 2,500 patients.

“Perhaps the most challenging adjustment to practicing in Haiti is that the medical system is so under-resourced,” says Dr. Stoner. According to Dr. Stoner, patients who come to the clinic are likely to have no other source of care. The emergency room at the nearest hospital in Jacmel, a city in southern Haiti, is about 10 miles away and is very limited in terms of the scope and level of services provided. The hospital has little or no equipment for diagnosing and treating patients who present with urgent care needs. In addition, the vast majority of Haitians who present as patients do not have the means to pay for the medical care provided at the hospital.

In 1999, the Friends of the Children of Haiti started a medical clinic in the rocky, wooded town of Cyvadier, which was in great need of medical care. At the clinic, patients present with typical chronic illnesses, such as hypertension and diabetes; tropical diseases, such as malaria; and acute and chronic conditions that have escalated from not seeking care sooner. Services provided include primary care, laboratory, pharmacy and dental. During his most recent medical mission, Dr. Stoner's team treated over 2,700 patients within a two-week period.

Dr. Stoner notes that, in addition to challenges due to the lack of available resources, the majority of patients speak Creole, and while the clinicians and volunteers have learned a lot of the language, the team has a translator to assist clinicians and other volunteers to better communicate with patients. About 90 percent of Haitians practice Voodoo, and this requires that the volunteers develop an understanding of patients' cultural and religious beliefs, traditions and practices in order to appreciate the impact these have on their health and to best deliver care in a way that is culturally-sensitive, competent and promotes compliance and improved health outcomes.



Dr. Gregg Stoner, Heartland Community Health Clinic, travels to Cyvadier, Haiti each year to volunteer for the Friends of the Children of Haiti project – an initiative that provides medical services to thousands of poor Haitians who would otherwise go without medical care.

During his March 2010 mission, Dr. Stoner and his team witnessed the destruction caused by the earthquake in January, as well as the depression and despair among the patients that the team treated. Many patients lost loved ones and their possessions. The majority of Haitians were living in “tent cities” that had been erected. “Compliance with medications is very difficult, not only due to language and cultural issues, but also because patients don't even have refrigeration or electricity,” said Dr. Stoner.

Dr. Stoner noted that since residency he had always wanted to serve on a medical mission trip, but balancing family needs and practice responsibilities were always a challenge. A good friend, also a physician, recruited him for his first mission. “I return each year because once you see the incredible need, it becomes very difficult not to go,” says Dr. Stoner.

Dr. Stoner's work at the Heartland Community Health Clinic, as well as in Haiti, is his life's mission and demonstrates his personal and professional commitment to the underserved. Through his example, he inspires and leads others to balance the challenges and demands of providing care to many in need, while ensuring that the care provided is high-quality, sensitive to the barriers and challenges patients face, culturally competent and compassionate. Dr. Stoner is truly a role model for current and future primary care clinicians, particularly those contemplating a career at a community health center. ■