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UINTAH BASIN HEALTHCARE

INTERVIEW

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Dr. John Wells Service Continues

Background: Dr. John Wells has been serving our community for six years as a Family Practice physician at Uintah Basin Healthcare, but his service reaches far beyond the borders of the Uintah Basin. Last February Dr. Wells reported back after his 11th medical mission to Honduras, providing services to those in need. In addition, Dr. Wells recently returned from serving in Puerto Rico after the recent devastation caused by Hurricane Maria.

HONDURAS HIGHLIGHTS

Who are you partnered with, and how did it all begin?

The University of Toledo Students for Medical Missions club organizes the Honduras Medical Mission in conjunction with SCORE (Special Commission On Relief and Education) of the Filipino Association of Toledo. It started in 1998 when Dr. Richard Paat took the first team, after Hurricane Mitch ravaged the country. The Lions Club, a local partner, coordinates with local government in the rural villages they select for the group to visit each year, along with organizing housing, meals and transportation.

Can you provide insight on the lives of the patients you serve?

Maria, a bright eyed four-year old, came into the clinic with her mother and older brother. Like most kids her age she was nervous being there. Her family woke up before it was light and walked several miles over trails through the forest and dirt roads to come in. They had been in lines for four hours to get through triage and to clinic. Her hopeful mother showed us her hands and explained that when she was two she had fallen dipping her hands in boiling water burning them badly. They healed, but both her hands were scarred closed. For any child in any country, this would be a devastating injury and limitation. In Honduras, the physical labor demands to survive make it even more so. We explained to Maria's mother that there wasn't anything we could do for her to resolve this problem. We gave her a prescription for Ibuprofen for when discomfort was bothering her. Her mother thanked us, grateful for the medication which would help her sleep better when she had hard nights and with her two children went to wait for another hour or two to pick up her ibuprofen at our clinic pharmacy and then to begin the walk home. What we have to offer seems very small when it's a hug and ibuprofen, but it makes some difference for a four-year old little girl.

Marcos is a little guy that came with his mom and one sibling to visit clinic. Like most families we met, they had gotten up early and walked some distance to get there. When the team arrived after a nearly 2-hour bus ride from our base city of La Esperanza, there was the usual large line of people that had started to form 5 hours before our team

arrived. Soccer or *futbol* as it's known in Latin America provides the kids with something to do during the long day at clinic. There is almost always a pickup game going while moms are waiting in line with kids subbing in and out as their turn in clinic or dental comes up. Clinic was winding down late in the day when Marcos was brought in. He had fallen while playing soccer and said his arm hurt. He wouldn't move his left elbow and had pain and swelling on exam. The doctor seeing him suspected a supracondylar fracture. It's a fracture that is just above the elbow. It is a relatively common fracture in children and can potentially have some serious complications. The nearest x-ray/medical facility capable of checking Marcos was back in La Esperanza at the hospital 2 hours away via a series of dirt and paved roads. To make the situation more difficult his family, as is the case with most of the rural Hondurans we see, had no motorized form of transportation. No car, no motorcycle, no scooter, not even a bicycle. This is not to mention the financial hurdle in getting care even if transportation could be arranged. His mother was understandably worried about what would happen. Our team splinted his arm and his mother and sibling came with the team on the bus to La Esperanza. The doctor caring for him gave the Lions Club member the \$3 needed for the x-ray. This was important since the hospital requires full payment and a receipt before services are rendered. When the Lions Club member returned, she had taken a picture of the x-ray which confirmed the fracture. They were going to be allowed to spend the night at the hospital and a visiting orthopedist was going to cast his arm the next day when he arrived. The same doctor gave some more money to cover some food for them that night (hospital doesn't serve food at all so families bring in food to patients), medical costs, and return transportation home.

I have six children. Five beautiful daughters and one accident-prone little three-year old boy named Jimmy. Two weeks after we got back from Honduras he fell while running in the back yard. He didn't want to move his left elbow and there was some noticeable swelling. We got in the car and drove the 5 minutes on paved roads to take him in. We easily got an x-ray which confirmed his fracture. That same morning, we could see an orthopedist. Since he had eaten, we went home and came back in the afternoon for him to be put out and have the broken arm aligned and casted. He returned a week later for a repeat x-ray to make sure it was healing well. At no point did we have to wonder how we were going to get Jimmy to the nearest x-ray in the only small hospital two hours away over mountainous dirt roads with no money, no food, and absolutely no transportation. We are very fortunate to have the access we enjoy in the US.

Gabriel, a 12-year old boy came up to me and earnestly explained to me that his sister REALLY needed a wheelchair that had just been unloaded in front of our clinic. He said she hadn't been able to walk for 30 years and was stuck at home in bed. He was sincere and persistent enough that I told him we would do a home visit when we got time and we would take the chair, but we would have to see her and decide because we only had one wheelchair. During a short break, I loaded a team of two medical students and my daughter Naomi in the back of a Lion Club members' truck and drove 15 dusty minutes into the countryside to the family's house. We were led through the chickens to the covered front porch of the home where we met **Juanita**. The first thing I noticed was her smile and warmth. The second was her polio-ravaged body. She contracted polio when she was 4. It had physically devastated both shriveled legs, twisted her trunk, and limited the use of her arms. Her smile, however, worked fine as she told us how blessed she was to have her family and life. I noticed she had a stick with a mirror tied to it. When I asked what it was

for, she showed me how she could hold it up and use it to look out her only window on the porch to see outside. Because Juanita's contorted body cannot manage a sitting position, the wheelchair needed to be adapted with some rope and a Leatherman. We helped get her situated. Gabriel was excited to take her on her first wheelchair ride ...in her wheelchair. After her first ride, we climbed into the back of the truck to go back to clinic. As I looked back at her window I saw her mirror and waved. Her mirror waved back.

What do the people you treat need the most?

During the week we treat about 3,800 patients so we see a lot of need. Intestinal parasites are rampant in the rural areas of Honduras. Enough so that every patient that isn't pregnant gets deworming medication when they go through triage. In 2007, we took pathologist Dr. Jim Hampton and a microscope. Jim took drinking water samples from various sources at each site. It would be a single outdoor spigot for the whole school or a tank that collected drinking water. When it was my turn to work with him, I remember him saying "I don't know what all these things are but there are a lot of them and they wiggle." Every single water supply was contaminated with parasites. A month or two after we got back from the trip Jim was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease and within the year he died. His research, however, was the start of our clean water project. In the history of medicine, doctors often don't agree on a lot of things, but hands down there is agreement that sanitation, especially clean water, has done more for people's health than any other modern innovation, including vaccines and antibiotics. For \$25 a family can be provided with a water filter that produces clean drinking water for an entire multi-generational family for 10 years. That clean water prevents many missed school/work days due to illness. It prevents parasitic infections shown to impair physical growth, slow learning, and sap nourishment that is often barely adequate. Diarrheal illness and dehydration are a major cause of death in young children. All of that is prevented for a cost of \$25 for an entire family and lasts ten years! Clearly, our clean water project has done more for the health of the people of Honduras than our clinic work, and is an important focus on our trips. Small and simple things.

PUERTO RICO HIGHLIGHTS

Who are you partnered with, and how did it all begin?

The same organization that has arranged medical missions to Honduras in the past, SCORE (**S**pecial **C**ommission **O**n **R**elief and **E**ducation), made arrangements to travel to Puerto Rico after the recent devastation of Hurricane Maria.

When some discovered I was going on this medical mission, they were anxious to help. My children, along with Dr. Greg Staker's children decided to hold a bake sale. My wife Emilee, fearing what would happen to her kitchen if she turned it over to kids age 4-10, steered them to cookies. She baked countless cookies and the kids sold them with their sign that said "Come Ther Is Cookies". People were super-generous, and they raised about \$500.

One of the physicians at UBH asked where I was going when I asked him to cover a meeting for me. When I told him he said, "I'll be right up with a check, I'd like to help". He donated \$500. Uintah Basin Healthcare also donated medications for the trip. Every bit of this helped to purchase medications and water filters.

What did you see upon arriving to Puerto Rico?

All the trees were turned into trunks or laying on the ground. Power poles were laying on the ground. There was no electricity except for generators. Most people didn't have running water. There was no communication at all – no cell phones, no telephones. Some couldn't yet talk to their family to let them know they were alright. I saw an assisted living center with no electricity or water with no administrators on site where some residents had taken charge. I have never seen anything like it.

What were your days like in Puerto Rico?

For the six days we were there, we did many home visits and clinic visits. We treated 4 heart attacks, a stroke, poisoning, many minor injuries and general medical issues. We were able to provide medication refills. We were able to see 1000 people and provide \$12,000 worth of medications. We donated 40 water filters to places that needed it the most. Clean drinking water is needed right now, so that was a focus of our mission.

The community support there was amazing. It gave the locals something to be a part of. I've never seen community support like that. It was hard leaving. We tried while we were there to see if another team could replace us and were unsuccessful in doing so. However, for the time we were there, I know we made a difference in getting them back on their feet.

Why do you give your time to humanitarian work?

I like to help people. I like the opportunity to meet people. In the areas I have served, the locals stop what they're doing and give everything they have to help. It's an honor to be part of that.

HOW CAN PEOPLE HELP?

I plan to go back to Honduras in February of 2018. I am excited to have Dr. Graham, his son Jacob, my oldest daughter Olivia, and Audrie Wisell joining me for my next mission. I often have generous and charitable patients and community members asking me what they can do to help after they hear about the need we encounter on our medical missions. Because I am not an organized charity, I direct them to SCORE. SCORE directs 100% of all donated funds toward water filters, supplies, and medications. Donations are tax-deductible and can be made at SCOREFAT.COM with a note saying, "Honduras Medical Mission" in the comments. Dr. Paat and SCORE are also leading another mission trip to Puerto Rico over Thanksgiving and could certainly use donations for that mission as well.

Here at Uintah Basin Healthcare, we are beyond thankful for people like Dr. John Wells who serve our organization, our community, and humanity in such a compassionate way. We thank you for your selfless service.

Maria



Maria's hand



Marcos



Juanita



Juanita with her new wheelchair



Juanita's window with her mirror



Honduras- Woman with Water Filter Supplies



Puerto Rico- Dr. Wells preparing supplies



Puerto Rico- Dr. Wells setting up a water filter



Puerto Rico- Devastation



Puerto Rico- Devastation



Puerto Rico- SCORE Group

