

Practice For Good: 5 Models for Giving Back with your Medical Group

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By Tobi Elkin

Leading a medical group is not for the fainthearted. The time and investment required to run a practice is already a big job. However, many medical groups go beyond providing day-to-day care to their communities to expand their work into charity services. Medical practitioners who possess compassion, courage, and empathy are — at the core — community ambassadors who have the heart and skillset to bridge the disparity gap between affordability and care to all. In this article, we're profiling medical group leaders who are leading sustainable, community health-based programs to underserved populations throughout the world. These are programs that not only deliver value to patients, but also help keep medical teams inspired to practice excellence.

A teenager named Muksin is one of a dozen kids, 10 of whom are HIV positive, living in the Karama Connection orphanage in Arusha, a village in Tanzania, East Africa. Suffering from a lesion on the right side of his lower lip, Muksin got lucky. Dr. Jon Mendelsohn, medical director of Cincinnati-based Advanced Cosmetic Surgery & Laser Center, came to the orphanage in June 2016 and performed surgery to correct the problem and reconstruct the boy's lip.

Mendelsohn did the procedure in a makeshift setup as a dog ran around outside chasing a goat. There were lots of flies. The conditions weren't ideal, but he made it all work. "Some of the kids' parents died from HIV-related illnesses, or their parents are too ill to care for them. These children were left to die; some were abused, beaten, or burned," Mendelsohn said. In some cases, the kids were taking care of their parents.

It wasn't Mendelsohn's first overseas medical mission — he's worked in Africa before and in China through the American Academy of Facial, Plastic, and Reconstructive Surgery's (AFPRS) Face-to-Face program, performing surgeries on kids with disfiguring craniofacial disorders. For Mendelsohn, last year's trip was a family affair; his wife, daughter, and son accompanied him. His daughter, as well as one of the teenage girls living in the orphanage, even assisted him with the surgery. "All the supplies were taken right out of our inventory," he said. He left gloves, sutures, instruments, wound-care supplies, and bacitracin at the orphanage. For aftercare, the head of the orphanage and Mendelsohn's teenage assistant removed Muksin's sutures; he called via Skype to check in.

Mendelsohn's 20-person practice, which started in 2000, embodies his belief in charitable giving and love of kids. "One of the things we've been talking about is having our team and staff regularly become involved in charitable activities. It's part of the culture of the practice and will become even more so as we focus on giving back."



This type of giving is ingrained in Mendelsohn who established his foundation, The Jon Mendelsohn Foundation for the Arts, more than a decade ago. In December 2016, the staff presented Mendelsohn and his wife with a check for the orphanage, which is run by a woman from Cincinnati, at the practice's annual holiday dinner. Closer to home, Mendelsohn works with veterans through Faces of Honor, a program sponsored by the AFPRS, and he worked on an Indian girl's scalp and facial scars at his facility. He hopes to extend his foundation's local activities to support individual staffers' favorite causes. The foundation has also contributed to family cancer centers, donated school supplies, and worked closely with kids' arts programs, among other projects.

As for the African orphanage, Mendelsohn plans to return with more teams: "I studied HIV and had an uncle who died of AIDs in the '80s. This is the beginning of what will be a long-term relationship for us."



Doctors Put On Their Traveling Shoes

Dr. Craig Della Valle, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in hip and knee reconstruction and replacement, is part of the 50+ person Chicago-based practice Midwest Orthopaedics at Rush (MOR). He's participated in several international Operation Walk missions, performing hip and knee replacements. The national Operation Walk organization places surgeons in remote areas. A nearly 50-person medical team performs between 50 and 100 hip and knee replacements in three days. Della Valle has gone on six missions in 10 years to Guatemala, India, Peru, and Nicaragua.

"The really nice thing is that there's no problem finding surgeons to do this. People see this as a way to give back," he said. While Operation Walk fundraises for the majority of the costs involved, each medical professional is required to make a \$5,000 donation and cover the costs of his or her plane ticket.

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In Peru, he recalled a woman with fused knees that she couldn't bend. His team did one knee replacement, then flew back to do the second knee three months later.

Foot Care For Shelter Residents

Soles4Souls, also associated with MOR, is a program led by foot and ankle physicians, along with more than 40 med students, residents, and physician assistants that is now in its 10th year. The team visits a large homeless shelter on Chicago's west side each year. Last November, the team provided foot care, new shoes, and socks to shelter residents at Franciscan House of Mary and Joseph. While the Soles4Souls organization donates the shoes and socks, MOR physicians purchase even more with their funds and donations from patients.

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Participating foot and ankle surgeon Dr. Johnny Lin said: “I think it’s just human nature to want to help others when you see someone that is in need. We are fortunate to be uniquely positioned to coordinate the efforts of several large organizations with abundant resources and combine this with our expertise to provide an impactful event for people who struggle to take care of their feet. Nothing will take away the harsh Chicago winter, but hopefully, we can at least lighten the load through our efforts.”

Dr. Nikhil Verma, a sports medicine surgeon associated with MOR, performed pro bono surgery this fall on two Sudanese refugee basketball players at Chicago-based Gold Coast Surgicenter, a 35+ provider practice. The teenagers, who left the Sudan to attend school and a basketball academy in Florida, traveled to Chicago to receive shoulder and knee surgery to help them continue to play basketball. “What was interesting to me is that kids are kids no matter where they are and where they come from. At the end of the day, their passion is basketball, and sports is a unifying agent,” Verma said.

Farther afield, Verma has traveled to India once a year for the last five years to offer education on arthroscopy, which includes pro bono surgery on patients.

In India, Eye Clinics Are Common

In India, there’s a tradition of ophthalmologists donating their services to eye camps throughout the country, according to Dr. Ittyerah Tholath, a retired ophthalmologist who works part-time in four hospitals in Kerala, in Southern India on the Malabar Coast. “The general pattern of eye camps in India is to take medical care to the doorsteps of the needy and poor,” he said.

Dr. Tholath said that many hospitals in India run the camps as weekend programs; teams of doctors and other medical personnel visit a school or other designated location to screen patients for disease, prescribe glasses, and dispense medicine. In some camps, glasses are supplied at a subsidized rate or for free. Patients who need surgery receive it at base hospitals free of cost.

Community-based Health Initiatives Close to Home

Henry Schein Medical, Inc., a provider of medical, dental, and veterinary supplies, along with vaccines and other pharmaceuticals, runs a unique program called Healthy Lifestyles, Healthy Communities through Henry Schein Cares, the company's global social responsibility effort, and its nonprofit Henry Schein Cares Foundation. Partnering with the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC), Henry Schein Medical teamed up with 14 local community health centers in 2016.

One of the largest events of 2016 took place in the Bronx in New York City where Schein teamed up with Urban Health Plan, a community health center with more than 100 providers that serves patients in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Schein and NACHC fund grants to health centers, like Urban Health Plan, to help increase awareness of chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease.

"Our goal is to help the communities that need the most help," said Irfan Buddha, senior director of marketing, Henry Schein Medical. Partnering with NACHC, Schein has helped fund community-based health programs for a decade. In the Bronx, the large event featured healthy cooking demos, tips on healthy eating and shopping, blood pressure stations, and dental and oral healthcare. Henry Schein helped fund the events with their partners. Grant-funded donations of healthcare products and supplies are valued at up to \$25,000. Two-year grants from Schein enable organizations to carry out their mission and provide care to underserved communities.

The devoted humanitarians profiled in this article share one thing in common — the belief in our collective humanity. The commitment the practitioners have embraced underscores the core values that drive the heart of their medical groups.

Tobi Elkin is a veteran content creator and consultant who enjoys crafting compelling narratives for diverse audiences. Based in New York City, her writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, and on websites including Advertising Age, AOL, the Associated Press, CMO.com, Narratively, Robb Report, The Huffington Post, and many others. She has consulted on thought leadership, marketing, and content strategy for technology firms, consumer brands, and non-profit organizations.