

Robert Marcus, M.D., with some of his Grant Park patients.

SERVICE TO OTHERS

By Rachel Moore

At Home and Abroad

It's in their job descriptions. Doctors, nurses, and other members of the healthcare profession are supposed to help those in need of medical attention. Yet, many also donate their time and services to their fellow man on their days off, after their daily rounds are made and their shifts are over. Why? They invariably tell you that it goes beyond the Hippocratic Oath or just trying to do the right thing. Most of these generous souls claim they volunteer because they get at least as much, if not more, out of the experience as the people they treat. These angels of mercy go beyond what's expected of them simply because they care.

Like most not-for-profit hospitals, Piedmont Hospital accepts a fair number of indigent cases every day. Patients who can't pay or are underinsured receive the same treatment as those who have the means or the coverage. Indigent care is one form of charity, and the stories that follow are some exceptional examples of volunteer work being done in Atlanta and abroad by Piedmont physicians and nurses.

The Ethiopian Connection

Last year during Sunday morning worship service, Julie Webster's pastor asked families to volunteer to host Ethiopian children in their homes — children who were coming to the U.S. for heart surgery they couldn't get in their own country. Webster, a nurse practitioner and community clinical case manager at Piedmont Hospital, had been working with cardiac patients for years. "When I heard these kids were coming to Atlanta specifically for open-heart surgery, I thought, 'Oh! That's me!

That's just something I'm supposed to do," Webster says. "I went home and told my husband that I volunteered us!"

Webster works full time at Piedmont Hospital, and she and her husband have three young children, so it was no small commitment on their part to take in yet another child for several months. Webster points out that hosting these children is not like bringing in an exchange student for the summer. They speak little or no English; they are very sick; they are away from their families; and they are about to undergo major surgery. Imagine how frightening the thought of going into a hospital for surgery is for a child.

"The concept of a hospital is very different in Ethiopia, and going to one is very scary for these children," Webster explains.

Many Ethiopian children owe their good fortune to Ken Thomas, M.D., cardiovascular surgeon who retired from Piedmont last year. Dr. Thomas was instrumental in helping Children's Cross Connection, a local non-profit missionary organization, sign up physicians, surgeons, and facilities needed to treat the five children who came to Piedmont for heart surgery. He had no trouble getting Piedmont volunteers. William L. Ballard, M.D., has worked with Children's Cross Connection before, helping set up a pediatric cardiac program in El Salvador. He agreed to care for the children. Alexander Justicz, M.D., and James Kauten, M.D., cardiovascular surgeons and former colleagues of Dr. Thomas, agreed to perform the surgeries. Cardiologist Allen Dollar, M.D., followed up on these five patients on a medical mission trip to Ethiopia.

The five children (ages 9-15) suffered from rheumatic heart disease — a disease that is life-threatening if not treated. The disease damages the heart valves and causes swelling, making it difficult for the heart to pump blood efficiently through the body. With such weak hearts, their tolerance for activity was exceptionally low.

Bosnia

Late last year, through several fortuitous twists of fate, Carl Fackler, M.D., an orthopaedic surgeon at Piedmont and a specialist in spine surgery and pediatric orthopaedics, agreed to perform a spine operation on a 13-year-old boy from Bosnia.

Mohammed was born with a disorder that causes severe scoliosis. The curve of his spine was over 100 degrees, twisted into the shape of a question mark, making it difficult for Mohammed to breathe. At four foot one and weighing only 46 pounds, Mohammed had been told repeatedly that nothing could be done for him because his scoliosis was too severe.

After studying the boy's medical records, Dr. Fackler determined that surgery could help. A church agreed to pay for the plane tickets from Bosnia; Piedmont Hospital approved the operation; and Dr. Fackler's staff and the other doctors in his group, the Peachtree Orthopaedic Clinic, agreed to donate their help. Two Piedmont pulmonary specialists, Bruce Cassidy, M.D., and Clifford Settle, M.D., agreed to help Mohammed with respiratory therapy. John Drummond, M.D., an infectious disease specialist, and a team of anesthesiologists, nurses and intensive care staff also were there to help.

The operation corrected the curvature of Mohammed's spine by more than 50 percent, adding two and a half inches to his height. The surgery also eased the compression of his lungs.

The Philippines

In January, a 27-member team of American and Filipino physicians from Piedmont and other Atlanta hospitals completed their fifth medical mission to the Philippines — this time to Butuan City on the island of Mindanao. They volunteered four and a half days and 155 surgeries, ranging from gallstones to plastic surgery. For reasons unknown, the islanders suffer from a high incidence of cleft palate, goiters and ovarian tumors. This was the second trip for John David Mullins, M.D., plastic surgeon, this time repairing 42 cleft lips on needy patients. OB/Gyns C. Willis Sherrer, M.D., Lorna Beldia, M.D., and Richard J. Taylor, M.D., and plastic surgeon Wilbur L. Baird, M.D., all from Piedmont, attended to other indigent patients from the community.

Piedmont physician Lorna Beldia, with Atlanta physician Casimiro Garcia, spearheaded this mission in 1992 through the Philippine American Medical Association of Georgia. Both physicians now serve as co-chairmen of PAMAG. The mission has served the Philippines every other year since 1992 at the invitation of the mayor of the destination city and the host hospital's chief of service. The group is granted permits to practice medicine by the proper authorities, and their efforts are recognized by the Philippine Embassy in Washington. The myriad of logistical arrangements required by such a mission are coordinated through PAMAG and the local Philippine medical societies, with assistance from local civic organizations such as the Jaycees and Rotarians.

The medical teams travel at their own expense to a destination in the Philippines where the need is the greatest. They provide free services for patients, consultations at local hospitals, and lecture to local medical societies. The medical equipment, instruments and unused supplies, which are all donated and shipped in advance, are left behind for the

Julie Webster, RN, with 15-year-old heart surgery patient, Zanash Berhanu.

JILL KORBIZON

Cardiovascular surgeon Alexander Justicz, M.D., with his two patients Nifisha Reta (16, left) and Abestayeu Abraham (14, far right). Far left is Janet Berry, RN, and Leeanne Mitchell, office assistant, (center) on day of discharge.

host hospitals. The number and mix of medical specialists, nurses and support staff vary from trip to trip. This was the third mission for Dr. Sherrer, who credits what they are able to do to the generous support and donations of medical supplies, equipment and money they receive from various charity organizations. "With their help," he says, "we're able to do so much more than we could on our own."

The next mission is scheduled for 2002 to Roxas City, Philippines, Dr. Beldia's birthplace.

Haiti

Since 1956, the people of Haiti have received free medical care at Hospitale Albert Schweitzer, thanks to the work of retired orthopaedic surgeon, F. James Funk, M.D. Now in its 44th year, this charitable cause is almost certainly the longest running medical relief effort provided by Piedmont physicians.

Dr. Funk first met fellow physician and philanthropist Larry Mellon in the 1950s. Dr. Mellon had just had the hospital built in Haiti to serve the needs of those he believed to be among the neediest, medically, in the Western Hemisphere. Dr. Funk offered his services of orthopaedic care to Dr. Mellon's hospital. Three times a year, no matter what the political situation in Haiti, Dr. Funk and a group of recruited orthopaedic surgeons travel to Port-au-Prince for a week of intense work.

"In Third World countries where some children have no access to antibiotics or medical care, if a child gets a throat infection — such as strep throat — the infection can attack the heart."

William L. Ballard, M.D.

An early 1970s photo of F. James Funk, M.D., (center) with a Haitian and American surgical staff.

“It’s a brutal week, but it is very fulfilling,” says Stephen Smith, M.D., one of the surgeons who has accompanied Dr. Funk for the past three years. “The hospital has running water and electricity, but that’s about it — there’s not even a phone. The people are incredibly appreciative. Some of them walk 50 miles to be at the hospital when we’re there and camp on the hospital grounds and in the halls waiting to be seen.”

At 79, Dr. Funk is retired from private practice but still goes to Haiti every year with two other retired colleagues, Joseph H. Dimon III, M.D., and Robert E. Wells, M.D. — both devoted and early participants in the mission. Why do they keep going back? Dr. Funk says, “There has never been any doubt in my mind that when I pass away, people in Atlanta will still get the care they need. But in Haiti, if you aren’t there to do something — to help — it just doesn’t get done.”

Charity at Home

Charity, as the saying goes, begins at home. Many more Piedmont physicians and staff members volunteer their services right here in Georgia. The complete list of local programs and services with which the Piedmont community is involved is long. (See “Our Role in the Community,” page 25.) Following is a profile of a few of the ongoing local efforts.

On a Mission

“Diabetes is an epidemic in America because obesity is an epidemic in America,” says Yvonne Young, a nurse at Piedmont Hospital.

“Diabetes is the number one cause of blindness, kidney complications and non-traumatic amputations. I am on a personal mission to turn around some of these statistics and get people to change their ways and control their disease.”

In 1998, Young started Partners for Preventive Health, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating Atlantans from all walks of life about diabetes and other chronic diseases. Although Partners operates on what Young calls a “zero cash budget,” it has screened more than 7,000 people at 300 sites since its inception. Forty Piedmont staff members, inspired by Young to volunteer their time and expertise to Partners, make the work possible. Piedmont Hospital donates the supplies they use.

Young has been involved in community service since 1985 when she became a volunteer teacher in her son’s school. Later, she became a volunteer nurse with Georgia Nurses Foundation Clinic for the homeless. In 1990, she won the Piedmont-sponsored Nicholas E. Davies Community Service Award for her work with children and with the homeless. In the last few years, however, Young focused her attention on diabetes because she also has the disease. She has gone from the early stage of denying the disease to taking active control, and now Young sees an opportunity to help others manage and even prevent diabetes. She suspects that the message she delivers is more powerful coming from her own personal testimony — she once weighed 200 pounds and smoked, both serious contributors to diabetes onset.

“No one knows better than I do that diabetes patients don’t always understand their disease and don’t correlate the food they eat with their

"I am on a personal mission to turn around some of these statistics and get people to control their disease."

Yvonne Young, RN

disease," Young says. "I wore a size 20, but I wouldn't change my habits sooner because I was in denial. But I finally did change my ways. I quit smoking. I still struggle with food sometimes, but I realized that diabetes is not a disease of deprivation; I can still eat what other people eat, I just have to watch it more carefully. Now I'm a size 12, and I feel great."

"It's Just Different"

Two years ago, Robert Marcus, M.D., an internist in the Piedmont Physicians Group, organized an effort to get his fellow physicians to volunteer their services one day a month at the Grant Park Family Health Center. The Center serves migrants, the poor, and the uninsured or underinsured in metro Atlanta. It offers regular OB/Gyn care, periodic dental care, pediatric care and internal medicine services ranging from chronic disease management to care for acute illness. The Center's medical director is Terry Wood, M.D., a retired Piedmont internist.

Dr. Marcus says, "I believe we're all expected to give our time, effort and money to help others, to give back to the community. By helping at the Center, I'm giving something back for my medical education. I also enjoy the work from a professional standpoint. There's something very satisfying about it."

Dr. Marcus tells of treating a migrant worker, 18 years old, who had a classic case of tuberculosis. "The most challenging thing about treating him was that he didn't understand the concept of infection. So you try to educate, not only about a condition, specifically, but also conceptually. It's just different."

Salvation Army Summer Camp

In addition to his work at the Grant Park Family Health Center, Dr. Marcus coordinates an annual Piedmont physician/volunteer effort that helps hundreds of underprivileged, inner city children from Atlanta Boys and Girls Clubs go to summer camp in the cool Georgia mountains.

Like any other summer camp, the Salvation Army Camp Grandview requires a physical examination for all participants. Dr. Marcus and his colleagues sponsor the buses that bring the kids to the Bellwood Club for the exams. For many of the children, this is the only health check-up they get all year. This year, five otorhinolaryngologists (ear, nose and throat specialists) checked the children for perforated eardrums, and other specialists checked for such conditions as scoliosis and heart murmurs. It's hard to say how many children have benefitted from this work, which was started 30 years ago by Brown W. Dennis, M.D., internist and a volunteer "extraordinaire" in his own right. When Dr. Dennis retired last year, Dr. Marcus committed to continuing the program.

Late-Breaking Missions

There are many more stories to tell about the humanitarian work done out of Piedmont Hospital — the Russian heart patient from Volgograd, the corneal transplants performed in South Africa and more. At press time, we learned that Joseph M. Woods IV, M.D., plastic surgeon, had just returned from six weeks in a remote African village where he repaired disabling burns (mostly of children who were injured by the campfires inside their homes used for cooking and heating), treated abscesses, pressure sores, and deformities. The only hospital in the area has 300 beds to serve 500,000 people, and is totally dependent on visiting physicians like Dr. Woods and support from America. And John D. Whelchel, M.D., director of Piedmont's Organ Transplant Services, is recently back from San Salvador where he performed three successful kidney transplants on children. Watch for their stories in future issues of *Piedmont Profiles*. ■

CAROLINE JOE

Diabetes Clinician Yvonne Young, RN, demonstrates how to draw insulin from a vial to a newly diagnosed patient.