AAOMS members quick to join Haiti relief effort

O ral and maxillofacial surgeons were among the many early responders to rush to Haiti’s aid in the aftermath of the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake on January 12, 2010. Several AAOMS members have kindly shared their experiences and impressions for this issue of AAOMS Today.

Following the quake, the medical system in Haiti was immediately overwhelmed by the loss of facilities, supplies, and damaged equipment and conditions on the ground that would require perhaps the greatest volume of trauma care ever needed in the struggling nation.

“I updated vaccinations, bought packaged food, gathered what I thought I needed for surgical supplies, started taking Malarone and filled a script for Cipro,” wrote Dr. Roser, DMD, MD, from Atlanta, GA. Like many OMSs, Dr. Roser researched opportunities to go to Haiti, as the large relief organizations scrambled to staff trages while juggling the burgeoning number of medical volunteer inquiries, supplies, and donations all attempting to land as soon as possible on the one available runway at the Port-au-Prince airport. After entering his name in the online databases of several volunteer organizations, Dr. Roser was contacted by a church minister from Atlanta, and his journey to Haiti began.

Kanyon Keeney, DDS, from Glen Allen, VA, had visited Haiti many times prior to the January quake with a medical mission organized through his church. “We have been going every year and we were already scheduled to go before the earthquake,” wrote Dr. Keeney. “The frustration is that logistics kept us from getting there sooner,” Dr. Keeney arrived in Haiti one week after the quake and spent 10 days providing care. Half of his time was spent at the Port-au-Prince airport providing care at the University of Miami Project Medishare mobile tent hospital and the other half in the heart of the city operating inside a police headquarters that had been converted into a medical facility.

In addition to Drs. Roser and Keeney, AAOMS was contacted by LCDR John Michael Ray, DDS, who began treating patients on the USNS Comfort (a hospital ship) soon after the quake, and by Vishtasb Broumand, DMD, MD, from Daytona Beach, FL, who arrived in Haiti with one of his practice partners, John Akers, DDS, via the Dominican Republic. Dr. Broumand drove 5 hours into Port-au-Prince providing care at the University of Miami/Project Medishare mobile tent hospital and the other half in the heart of the city operating inside a police headquarters that had been converted into a medical facility.

The need for wound care also required the attention of Dr. Keeney, but he still had the opportunity to care for a patient using a bone plating kit that was donated to him by a medical supplier. “When I first arrived, the orthopedic surgeons didn’t seem to realize the scope of what I, as an OMS, could practice, so it was mine to make the great decision.”

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but they soon found out, to their delight,” said Dr. Keeney. With the enormous number of bone injuries caused by the earthquake, orthopedic surgeons worked around the clock to keep up with the flow of patients entering clinics throughout the country.

Dr. Vishtasb Broumand worked long hours at the University of Miami Global Institute and Project Medishare. “We worked around the clock and after 5 days returned home to Daytona Beach, Florida, exhausted but extremely gratified with the human contact we made and the lives we touched,” wrote Dr. Broumand. “I am unsure of the number of patients that have already been evacuated to Florida, but we were able to treat a lot of soft tissue injuries and even perform open reduction and internal fixation of the zygomaticomaxillary complex as we took 3,000 pounds of supplies with us.” Some patients with serious injuries were transported to Florida for additional care.

Dr. Michael Kapp, who arrived in Haiti on January 19, wrote, “We ran a field triage, hospital, and post-up out of a Cabaret, one hour north of Port au Prince. We were the only team in the region and the devastation there was as great as in Port au Prince. We had patients with untreated limb fractures, post-amputation patients, head wounds, and large avulsive injuries. We were fortunate to secure two USN Black Hawk helicopters for transporting our most critical to the USNS Comfort. Fortunately we had a satellite phone and our GPS so that we could give the UN our coordinates and the Navy could locate our position.”

Dr. Ray, aboard the USNS Comfort, would see many of the most serious trauma cases. Dr. Ray wrote, “The first patients brought onboard had sustained horrific injuries—many large burns, lots of children with unsalvageable limbs due to crush injuries and burns. The facial injuries were severe as well, including complex and complicated fractures—NOE fractures, Le Fort IIIs, and frontal sinus fractures. We received patients with isolated facial bone fractures as well, such as routine mandible fractures; however, these were outnumbered considerably by the patients with panfacial fractures. My patients were both postoperative patients as well as those awaiting surgery.”

Shortly after the earthquake, Dr. Ray wrote, “On the USNS Comfort, we were only accepting trauma and critically ill patients. We had to decline patients with chronic diseases, pathology and terminally ill patients due to the overwhelming number of trauma patients. I personally operated on patients with maxillofacial trauma anywhere between 8 and 12 hours per day, seven days a week, and assisted with orthopedic or general surgery patients the rest of the time.”

After a fighting spirit in the wake of a natural disaster, Haiti is such an impoverished nation. I’m sure people need the tremendous amount of work that oral and maxillofacial surgeons could do. There are lots of people with significant head and neck pathology that OMSs could treat.”

Dr. Roser stated, “I was inspired by the courage of the Haitian people, and by the many people I met, who on short notice committed themselves to helping provide aid and relief for people they did not know, in a place most had never been. I was inspired by the number of organizations and countries that quickly responded and, along with the Haitian medical community, brought hospitals back on line and established outreach medical facilities.”

As supplies and doctors arrive where needed, each passing day has brought Haiti one day closer to better days, although the hardships and sorrows of the immediate aftermath of the quake’s destruction remain in the forefront for many.

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Dr. Ray wrote, “The stories that accompanied these injured patients were heart-wrenching. One night while rounding on a postoperative patient, I explained to her that she is doing well and can be discharged from the ship in a couple of days. She told me that she is in no hurry to leave because she has no home and everyone in her family is dead. Unfortunately, this is still a very common story. Placement of these displaced and injured patients is very difficult. The devastation ashore and the living conditions are incredible. The TV doesn’t do it justice.”

But even with such sorrow, there is great determination to see the situation through and visit Haiti in the near future. Drs. Roser, Keeney and Broumand are looking forward to incorporating their experience and ideas into a prolonged effort to fill the oral and maxillofacial surgery needs of Haitians.

Dr. Michael Kapp assists a wounded child boarding a helicopter.

Dr. J. Michael Ray (left) aboard the USNS Comfort with a patient and his older brother.

“A left after six days, wanting to stay longer. There is so much left to do,” explained Dr. Roser. He notes that many teams who have visited Haiti in the past were routinely confronted with a large volume of extractions, and as Haiti takes up its rebuilding efforts including medical facilities, the oral surgery needs in Haiti are likely to increase.

Dr. Keeney has a few cases that he wants to follow and he plans to go back to Haiti soon. He also hopes that volunteer oral and maxillofacial surgeons might be able to develop a rotation to travel to Haiti and work for 4-5 days at the airport location in the near future. For the time being, it’s the easiest and most efficient way to stage care of the patients in need.

Upon returning from Haiti, Dr. Broumand has shared his experiences with local dental societies and has set up a foundation called “Operation Changing Lives” to fund trips to Haiti to help patients who suffered injuries as a result of the earthquake. His goal is to help those who have needed oral and maxillofacial surgery care for some time and could benefit from funding and/or sponsorship to receive care in the United States.

As Haiti increases its capacity to provide medical services to those in need, oral and maxillofacial surgeons have the opportunity to provide much needed care. Writes Dr. Broumand, “There is a tremendous need in Haiti, and AAOMS and its members can certainly help.”

Dr. J. Michael Ray (left) aboard the USNS Comfort with a patient and his older brother.

A father comforts his son while waiting for transport to the USNS Comfort, as the injured boy’s sister waits by his side.

Dr. Michael Kapp assists a wounded child boarding a helicopter.

Dr. J. Vahitasb Broumand (second from right) and his fellow volunteers, in front of the airplane which transported them to Haiti.

Dr. Vishtasb Broumand (second from right) and his fellow volunteers, in front of the airplane which transported them to Haiti.