An Interview with Kaiser Permanente’s Mary Sue Carlson, MD, a Frequent Visitor to Haiti

This week, representatives from Kaiser Permanente are in Haiti to see the new Ministry of Public Health building, which Kaiser Permanente funded following the 2010 earthquake that killed 200,000 people and displaced more than 1.6 million.

Mary Sue Carlson, MD, an ophthalmologist at Kaiser Permanente Falls Church, Va. Medical Center has been traveling to Medor, Haiti for the last 11 years to provide medical care, build schools, develop clean water and reforestation programs, and organize several eye and pediatric clinics. Dr. Carlson was recently announced as a David Lawrence Community Service Award winner for her extraordinary efforts to improve the health of communities in Haiti.

In light of the recent opening ceremony at the Ministry of Public Health building in Haiti, we caught up with Dr. Carlson to provide some perspective about her experiences in that country.

**You traveled to Medor following the 2010 earthquake to provide much needed medical attention. What are some of your memories of that trip?**

We experienced a lot of hardships. We had three vehicles that broke down trying to navigate the "road" to Medor. Because of the vehicle malfunctions, 20 boxes of medicines were left at Plasak, a seven-hour walk to Medor. These were needed for the clinic, but were not delivered up the mountain. We also ran out of over-the-counter medicines. When I was there, one adult and two children from the school died from cholera. The lack of running water was a definite negative. We could all smell our poor hygiene. The bathrooms were disgusting. But this is daily life for the people of this area.

The positive memories I have of that trip was that the medical clinic treated more than 700 patients. We learned that much of the illness in the area is related to insufficient health care, malnutrition and under-education. People suffer from poverty and neglect. We were able to reinforce existing public-education initiatives, teaching the school children and all clinic patients about cholera and the need to
treat water with bleach. We distributed bleach, soap and oral-rehydration packets; things that may actually have saved lives.

**Your first trip to Haiti was actually in 2001. What has convinced you to go back again and again for 11 years?**

I think of the people of Medor when I first wake up each morning and when I go to bed each night. I spend several hours each day working for the people there. I feel a draw to the people of Haiti. Going back so often, I now have friends there. It is like we are growing up together. And it is so awesome to see the developments that are occurring in the area. Lots of good things are happening in Medor, despite all the hardships. I am happy to be part of it.

**How would you describe the people of Medor?**

I have fallen in love with the people there — their kindness, their love of family and community. Though extremely poor, they seem to live life to the fullest. They sing and dance more than we do here. Also, because they don’t have electricity, they spend time with each other instead of in front of the TV or computer, as we often do here.

**Do you think you’ve become a different person or clinician because of your work in Haiti?**

It’s taught me to value all the wonderful equipment, supplies and medicines we have here. I can’t take a drink of water without thinking of the people who have to hike to the nearest water source to collect their water. And I think about all the water sources there that are contaminated with fecal bacteria and worms. Knowing about their hardships has helped me be more empathetic and appreciative.

**What do you like eating when you are there?**

I love the fresh mangos and avocados and beans and rice. Walking around the outdoor market and seeing the meat sitting out in the heat, with bugs all around, makes me want to be a vegetarian while I am there. Although I do eat small portions of goat when it is served.

**When you come home from your trips, what keeps you up at night?**

I think of all that could be done to be helpful. For example, the airstrip that is there and the free emergency air ambulance service that’s just waiting to be
initiated once permission to use the airstrip is obtained. This life-saving program should be operational now! I lay in bed racking my brain about what I can do to help get the Haitian government to grant permission to use the airstrip.

**What does the future hold for you and Haiti?**

A new project deals with the $10,000 donation that comes with the David Lawrence Community Service award, which I recently won. I found a place in Virginia that refurbishes old laptops and equips them with educational software in French. I collected 25 used laptops and had them “fixed up” in order to start a computer lab in Medor’s secondary school. The problem is that there is no electricity in the community except for the one generator in the rectory. And a lot of gasoline has to be carried up the mountain in order to run the generator long enough to charge the computers. The $10,000 from Kaiser is slated for a solar system to power the computer lab. It’s not enough to do the entire job, but it will fund phase 1. The kids and teachers are thrilled!

Also, we are working to raise the funds to build phase 2 (eight classrooms) for the new primary school. I am also writing a grant application that is due on Jan. 31 — to plant 300,000 trees in the area in the next year.