

Editorial

## Profiles in volunteerism Gary Heit, MD, PhD, and Americare Neurosurgery International

Pursuing a medical education followed by additional long years in specialty training requires vision, commitment, hard work, perseverance, and an unwavering desire to achieve excellence. These requirements and goals become habits that serve us well as we grow our careers.

The specialty of neurological surgery and of allied specialties has grown to levels of excellence often taken for granted today, and this has occurred primarily during the lifetimes of many of us who are today's senior neurosurgeons. To the question, "Where does the specialty of neurosurgery go from here?" we must respond, "To even higher levels of excellence."

We must also address the question, "What can be done to bring modern neurosurgery to people in developing countries where so little neurosurgical care is available today?"

Gary Heit, PhD, MD, works to bring modern neurosurgery to people who do not have access to it. His first medical mission was inspired by his sister who lives in Peru and who told him of the tremendous health care needs there. Sharing his vision with colleagues, he found that they, too, were interested in joining him on these missions.

Then, Dr Heit learned that neurosurgical instruments and other items of essential equipment commonly available here are absent there. Children in Peru die because shunts are not available to treat hydrocephalus. He approached medical equipment and supply representatives, asking for donations. Many have demonstrated heartening generosity, donating shunts and surgical equipment.

On May 18, 2002, Dr Heit set off for Cuzco, Peru, as a neurosurgeon volunteer. Accompanying him were 13 surgical colleagues, nurses, and surgical technicians. They brought shunt hardware, spinal fusion instruments and hardware, external ventricular drains, and antibiotics including Kezol and Keflex, steroids, and of course, greatly appreciated donations of cash to cover transportation costs.

Arriving in Cuzco was an operating team composed of 2 neurosurgeons, 1 orthopedic surgeon, several registered nurses, and other perioperative personnel. The team spent 10 days in Peru working in association with Dr Diomedes

Arias Villena. They operated on 25 patients. Cases ranged from reconstruction of complex spinal deformities to repair of pediatric skull fractures and treatment of adult brain tumors. Because of the excellence and expertise of the well-trained and well-organized neurosurgical team, they were able to complete their work without experiencing any complications.

Doctor Heit and his neurosurgical and orthopedic team returned home physically tired but exhilarated and with stories to tell. They also had a vision for more volunteer work in the future. Doctor Heit and his colleague, Ms Gerstner, developed a medical care model for a humanitarian organization they named Americare Neurosurgery International (AMCANI; see [amcani.org](http://amcani.org)).

The stated goal of AMCANI is to promote locally sustainable, modern neurosurgical care in developing countries, maintaining respect for the local population and with integration of the work into the local culture. It is the endeavor of AMCANI to increase the level of medical care in host countries by providing professional training and the development of appropriate support resources such as physical therapy, rehabilitation skills, and nursing care in the context of supply capital equipment that the host country cannot afford.

In launching AMCANI, Dr Heit describes his premise: "We as Americans are fortunate yet wasteful. Modern neurosurgery requires expensive capital equipment that frequently cannot be afforded in developing countries. At the same time, hospitals in the United States are retiring equipment that is still viable for medical practice. For example, the operative microscope has been a defining element of modern neurosurgery, and even though these instruments have the potential to last for many years requiring only such low cost maintenance as light bulb changes, they are often replaced by newer models. However, delivery of a retired operative microscope to a competent neurosurgeon in a developing country can revolutionize his medical practice.

"It is the aim of AMCANI to recycle durable equipment that has minimal overhead and to deliver with that equipment training in the neurosurgical techniques it enables and the

postoperative care required for more complex procedures. By having neurosurgical teams accompany this equipment, and offering teaching expertise, this model will benefit thousands of patients throughout the developing world. The plan will also help in minimizing waste in our own US medical system.

“In sum, the purpose of AMCANI is to deliver neurosurgical training and durable medical supplies to local neurosurgeons in developing countries.”

The Americare Neurosurgery International has received 501(c)3 status from the Internal Revenue Service. This enables volunteer physicians and nurses to deduct on their tax returns their travel and subsistence expenses.

Since the Peru mission, Dr Heit and AMCANI volunteers have also done volunteer neurosurgical work at the Department of Neurosurgery at the Hue Medical College in Vietnam, and they are preparing to work in hospitals in other countries. For these, AMCANI seeks neurosurgical teaching volunteers who are board eligible or board certified Neurosurgeons, and also surgical nurses, neurointensivists, neurologists, and other qualified team members.

The volunteer work Dr Heit has done through AMCANI demonstrates the effect that can be accomplished by one person. The enthusiasm shown in the telling of stories by one

person who has had a vision for service to others becomes the spark that ignites the fire in others.

Through Profiles in Volunteerism editorials in *Surgical Neurology*, it is our goal to raise awareness of the tremendous needs in the world today and to encourage others to help bring modern neurosurgery to people in developing countries. We also remind our readers of their unique abilities to identify medical equipment and supplies that might be donated by hospitals and by surgical supply companies for use in countries where the needs are so great.

As Dr Heit and his colleagues have shown us, much can be done to bring improved neurosurgical care to developing countries. The American College of Surgeons (ACS) has launched Operation Giving Back Program through which neurosurgeons who wish to volunteer can find their place to serve. The ACS offers a list of organizations like AMCANI through which neurosurgeons can volunteer.

Mel Cheatham, MD, FACS

*Department of Neurosurgery*

*UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine*

*Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA*

*E-mail address: [nurosgn@aol.com](mailto:nurosgn@aol.com)*

Your help is needed, in bringing Neurosurgery to the world.

Can you help the journal of *Surgical Neurology* in the following ways?

1. If you have done volunteer work as a Neurosurgeon, or know of someone who has done this kind of work, *please* send a summary page giving your name, or that of the other volunteers you are able to identify to [NUROSGNPROF@aol.com](mailto:NUROSGNPROF@aol.com) and also contact information and a brief description of the work you (or they) have done. Through an editorial page in *Surgical Neurology*, we want to identify as many neurosurgeon volunteers as we can.

2. Should you have an interest in volunteering for a short-term assignment in a developing country, either as a Clinical Neurosurgeon or as a Visiting Professor of Neurosurgery, please let us know.

You may contact *Surgical Neurology*, to see what you can do to bring Neurosurgery to people less fortunate than you by e-mailing [surgicalneurology@dc.rr.com](mailto:surgicalneurology@dc.rr.com)