

# Haiti Earthquake Relief

Written by Richard Ruppenstein, PA/WCC

Dedicated to my new friends, Michael and Andrea Brewer, Haitian Missionaries

My trip to aid the victims of earthquake devastation, Port Au Prince, Haiti, January 2010

Having been to Thailand after the tsunami in 2005 I knew what to expect as far as wounds and infections and how many days after the trauma did we have to save limb and life after the earthquake in Haiti. As I watched the TV news reports about how little help was getting to the majority of injured I knew more lives would be lost in the remote areas than would be saved in the major cities where all the large "tent cities" were being erected in front of the TV cameras and reporters. The problem in these third world countries ( if there is such a label as a forth world country Haiti would qualify) is that most people have no way to get to the cities where the help is. They do not have roads or transportation systems like we do here in the US. They really do use animals to pull carts in many places throughout the world to get anywhere. Haiti being the poorest country in the hemisphere with the highest crime rate as well is an extremely dangerous place and initially I thought it out of the question to travel there to help the injured. The international airport was closed to civilian air traffic, the closest international airport was in the Dominican Republic some 195 miles away and the only major hotel was completely destroyed. There was complete destruction of all buildings 25 miles from town. Then one day I was surfing the web reading articles about orphanages that were destroyed by the earthquake in Haiti and saw a picture of an American couple carrying their orphans out of a collapsed orphanage and decided I would go to Haiti to help these people but only if I could find a safe place to stay while I was there would I make the trip. In Thailand I was able to sleep some nights on the beach but in Haiti that was out of the question. I contacted the reporter who wrote the article about the orphanage and she gave me the email address of the couple at the orphanage in Haiti and I emailed them and they agreed to let me have my headquarters at their orphanage. (You need some place to store your supplies while out in the community providing care). Once I decided to go I connected with several people who funded part of my trip to Thailand and again asked for their help. Again the generosity of family, friends, patients and colleagues allowed me to purchase two large suitcases full of medical supplies and medications. Echo Pharmacy in my hometown donated thousands of dollars worth of medications and supplies as they did for my trip to Thailand. These donations most definitely saved many lives in Haiti and my heartfelt thanks goes out to those who gave to the cause because without their donations my excursions would not be affordable. So I packed three suitcases with supplies and American snacks for the kids, bought a plane ticket to Santo Domingo Dominican Republic and headed on my way. It is 195 miles from Santo Domingo to the Haitian border over the poorest roads in the world. Dominican roads at least were somewhat paved but after crossing the border into Haiti the roads were dirt and rock and dusty. The ride to Haiti was the most stressful five hour car drive I ever completed. I rented a car because the personnel at



the US Embassy recommended it so that in case I needed to leave Haiti quickly for whatever reason I would have a means to do so. I was lost for a short time and not one person I asked for assistance spoke a word of English. Where's a cop when you need one? The border crossing was also very chaotic with thousands of people and vehicles trying to squeeze through a one lane gated border with soldiers carrying machine guns guarding the entrance and

peering into each vehicle with fingers on the trigger. I was very glad that the missionaries from the orphanage were waiting for me just after the border crossing and took me to their home. They had not been in an air conditioned vehicle for many months and in the 90 degree heat they were all smiles.

I arrived in Haiti on day 10 post trauma (post earthquake) and went prepared to do a lot of wound debridement and treatment of skin infections and cellulitis. I had arrived in Thailand on day fourteen after the tsunami so I knew what the wounds would look like and the level of care I would have to administer to the injured. I hired an interpreter and began walking the streets of the outskirts of Port Au Prince and within my first hour treated 25 patients and told several to return with me to the orphanage for some more intense debridement. As expected red, ugly, pussy wounds was the norm. Everywhere and anywhere on the body I found wounds on people. Long, lineal lacerations on extremities and torso, large deep puncture wounds, crushed limbs with large areas of missing skin and deep areas of exposed fat tissue and muscle, tendons, ligaments were open to the air. Many legs were red, hot and swollen and painful. Scalp wounds were also common and ranged from abrasions to large denuding lacerations. Some wounds were sutured by family members with a needle and thread, all wounds were infected. My first day was over before I knew it and I set my tent up on the roof of the part of the orphanage that wasn't destroyed by the earthquake and slept there for the week. Everyone at the orphanage slept on the roof because we continued to have aftershocks and if the rest of the building would collapse there would be no concrete to fall on top of us. The following morning word had spread that there was an American doctor staying at the orphanage giving free medical care and they were waiting at the front gate at sunrise. Some wounds I could easily remove the layers of dead tissue simply by picking up a flap of skin and snipping it off with scissors, others required several minutes of hard scrubbing with betadine to remove the nonviable tissue. The locals make a homemade ointment which is made from the leaf from the cotton plant, charred black over a fire and spread on the wound. The wounds which had this ointment on them were definitely less infected than those without it. The substance adhered to the wound very well and the first few patients I saw I attempted to scrub this stuff off completely but then after seeing that it did in fact help the healing of the wound I left it intact in future patients. Most wounds needed to be scrubbed clean and I did this

with 3" x 3" gauze and betadine. Sometimes I used some Bactine wound spray for anesthesia if someone complained. One medication I did not bring was pain medication, other than Advil. Next time I think I'll bring Vicodin and Valium for pre medicating the difficult cases. Those sutures that were put in by family members were ready to come out at this point but it was not easily done. None of the wounds were cleaned since having the sutures put in so they were covered with dead skin, dried exudates and healing skin. A very difficult and painful procedure for me and the patient.

Each morning I would see a few patients for dressing changes at the orphanage gate before we would head out for the day. Each day we set out for a different part of town. Patients were everywhere. On the street, in tents, under tarps, on roofs we found the wounded. Some had received care earlier having had casts applied for broken bones. One such patient was a 20ish year old girl we found lying in a hammock in an alleyway we were walking down. She had a full leg cast on with an ace wrap covering an area mid lower leg. She had a large deep gash on the opposite leg covered by old, yellow, dried out gauze pads. I removed this dressing and found a puncture wound covered in exudate with red borders. I

cleaned it up, put on a nice clean dressing and moved over to look under the ace wrap on the other leg. I found another dirty old dressing under the ace wrap and when I removed it I saw something you usually only read about in text books, maggots. Hundreds of them just squirming all over the wounds and the dressing I had in my hand. But most amazingly, it was absolutely the best looking wound I saw the entire time I was there. It looked like fresh healing tissue, clean, pink, viable tissue.



That was the only wound I left as I found it. I did wonder though if those maggots might crawl up the inside of her casted leg towards her private areas but since there is no food along the way I didn't think so.

The fourth day while walking down a relatively large street we stumbled onto a small tent city in an old city park which was being run by a fourth year Haitian medical student. Of course he spoke no English and finally another man came over who happened to be from Boston. He was born in Haiti and moved to Boston as a teenager and returned to Haiti to search for family members. There were 26 patients lying on tarps and blankets on the ground covered with tarps hanging from trees. The med student had no supplies except a few bottles of IV fluids to try and treat the many people dehydrated from the 90 degree weather. His stethoscope was broken and he had no blood pressure cuff. There were many wounds there but also the very elderly who seemed to have given up and just lay on the ground waiting to die. People with asthma and no medication. Anxiety and post traumatic stress syndrome were showing now with chest pains, shortness of breath and feelings of doom. One teenage boy had

very yellow eyes and fingernails and I was told he had yellow fever. He was lying in the middle of all the other patients and mosquitoes were abundant. I examined every patient there and started a little chart on everyone and started to write orders for the three nurses who were there. With the help of the guy from Boston we were able to translate my English to their Creole French. Everyone was started on antibiotics and we began to debride the wounds. Before we finished all the wounds the sun began to set and you really need to be off the streets of Haiti when the sun goes down. So we returned to the orphanage for the night and tried to rehydrate and renourish ourselves. There was very little food and water available but we were able to have someone round up a few chickens and before you knew it we were eating some of the best chicken I ever tasted.

Nights were spent sleeping on the roof in a small tent listening to the chickens, dogs, and cows make noise all night. It was cool on the roof and the one place you could get a few minutes of peace amongst the 25 kids your living with at the orphanage. The kids were great, very loving and appeared very happy. Most were just abandoned there by their mother and remain usually until they are 18. Some are lucky and are adopted by families back in the US through the church that sponsors this orphanage. These kids are happy just to eat three times a day and have a safe place to sleep at night. Staff members are also very fortunate because they also once lived out on the streets in Haiti and somehow found their way to this place and were employed by the orphanage. When you are employed by the orphanage you become a part of it. They live here, eat here, work here and are offered a chance to move up the ladder and become leaders at the orphanage. Wesley was my translator and guide who took me through the streets of Haiti safely. He is 19 and showed up at the orphanage last year and asked if he could stay their because his mother told him to leave the house because she could no longer feed him. He wandered the streets for several months and one day found Michael (Orphanage Pastor) preaching on a street corner. He listened for an hour and at the end went up to Michael and asked if he could come and live at his orphanage because he wanted to praise the Lord and work for the Lord. Michael invited him in and hire him as their translator and handyman, he somehow learned English and spoke it very well. He is now attending high school and wants to be a Pastor in the future. Nighttime was also a time for Michael, (orphanage director, Pastor, my initial contact) to have story time. Actually he was preaching but you would never know it. He would tell modern day stories and explain them in parable form its relationship to passages in the Bible. I really enjoyed this time we spent together up on the roof in conversation. He also informed me of some history about Haiti and the Voodoo religion. During Haiti earliest days in 1804 the crime rate in Haiti was already very bad. The story goes that the Devil came to the people and offered to protect them for the next 200 years if they worshipped him. They agreed and



Voodoo became a widespread religion. In 2004 when the pact was up Haiti had their worse year for murder and crime in history. The Devil returned to the people and offered them another 200 years of protection if they again agreed to worship him for that amount of time. A new pact was signed with the Devil until 2204. What they are being protected from is unknown since the crime rate continues to rise in Haiti.

Let me tell you a little about those wonderful people who without knowing who I was invited me into their home, their orphanage so that I could provide medical care to their surrounding community. Michael(32) and Andrea(27) Brewer have worked for the Church since adulthood. Each have been missionaries in places we only see in the movies. Panama, Brazil, Amazon River, Philippine Island, and even Las Vegas Nevada. They have pastored to remote tribes in far off jungles and on the hard city streets of inner city America. They come from Tennessee and talk funny (sorry Andrea, had to get the last laugh :) but their hearts are with God and the children they now care for. They are married only six months and live in Haiti alongside and with the Haitian people. There is nothing special or different in the way they live compared to their next door neighbor. No hot or even running water, electric provided a few hours a day by a small generator in the driveway, no McDonalds or Carvel within several hundred miles. They use a beat up old small truck called a tap-tap for transportation. They have given up living in the luxury of America for a fourth world country to be sure that some of the abandoned children in Haiti are given the opportunity to live a relatively normal life in Haiti. I salute these too young people who have devoted themselves to Gods children and hope they are able to help fulfill the dreams of all the young people who pass through their door. I totally enjoyed my stay with them and consider myself very lucky to have met such a wonderful couple. Their companionship and conversation each evening helped us to forget some of the horrors we witnessed on our rounds during the days travels. One of the problems I had in Thailand was that I was totally alone at night with no one to share conversation with so I would lay at night looking at the stars thinking about the events of the day. After doing this night after night the horrible thoughts became horrible dreams and nightmares which followed me home and remained for many months. Although Haiti was a hundred times worse than Thailand I did not bring these bad thoughts and dreams home with me. I have lots of good thoughts to reminisce about this time so the bad memories hopefully are locked up somewhere deep in my brain and will remain there forever. So thank you Michael and Andrea for giving me these good thoughts and for your friendship.

We loaded up the knapsack and bags with medical supplies and headed back to the tent city the next morning. We brought all the supplies I had left since I only had one more day before heading home. I started a little pharmacy inside a little shed on the grounds and the nurses logged every medication I donated translating the names to French. I wrote directions and indications for the many type of antibiotics I brought and translated that. Then we made rounds again seeing each patient. Now there were more than yesterday, 20-30 more. Mostly wounds but several sick kids. One at a time we treated whatever what was in front of us. In the last five days I handed out over 10,000 antibiotic tablets, hundreds of tubes of Neosporin and this was just a drop in the bucket. I knew at least that those several hundred patients I was able to get antibiotics into were probably going to be alright. I know at least we save many limbs from the surgeon's amputation knife.

The scope of the devastation is surreal. No matter where you look there is nothing but piles of concrete and concrete blocks, there are no buildings standing. There are tents and tarps hanging from trees everywhere. People sleeping, eating, playing in the piles of debris. There is no way to rebuild anything. Bulldozing everything and burying it seems like the only solution. There are still thousands of bodies under the concrete which must be recovered. Big infectious diseases are about to take hold because there is no public waste removal and urinating and defecating in the street is becoming the norm. There is no rain this time of year so it sits there rotting in the hot sun, the odor mixing with that of the dead bodies makes nausea a constant state. How do you move a million people into the mountains with no sanitation, no food source, no employment opportunities. What do they do when they get there? People sitting around with nothing to do day after day is trouble waiting to happen. These people have the highest crime rate in the hemisphere and despair, hunger, and hopelessness can breed criminality in the best human being. There are very few policemen in Haiti, certainly not enough to move half to the mountains to provide a safe environment for the relocated population. And where are all the donated goods, food



and water sent to Haiti from other countries? Where are they handing out these supplies to the population? I saw only one truck on one day on a main street in Port Au Prince handing out water. Having walked a large portion of the local streets in and around Port Au Prince I did not see any American presence providing any type of aid. The day before I departed, the orphanage was down to one case of water for all the kids and staff and running low on food. We drove one and a half

hours to the World Vision Missionary in Dominican Republic to try and replenish the supplies but when we arrived the warehouse was empty. Nothing available and they didn't know when they would be resupplied. This is the place that many of the orphanages get their supplies, a huge distribution point that literally keeps thousands of people alive everyday and they had nothing. Where is it all? You hear of the millions of dollars donations throughout the world and yet I didn't see more than a couple hundred dollars of water being handed out. I drove alongside UN convoys on the road from Dominican Republic to Haiti which carried tons of supplies for the people of Haiti. It was the same in Thailand. Is it incompetence, red tape, theft? They blame logistics. "A complicated problem because of the poor roads and lack of communications". People are stealing the water from one another because not enough is given out and people are desperate. If you gave out three trucks full of supplies instead of one there would be an abundance of goods and no need to steal from each other. There is so much food and water stored at the airport right now that they are turning away donations at this time. These are the reasons I do not join an established group of medical

professionals who respond to disasters. Nobody seems to see the big picture in these type of tragic events. They tend to concentrate their response to the cities and neglect the rest of the population living remotely. They set up their big tent cities and wait for people to show up. This certainly does fill a need but leaves a huge part of the population without the ability to be treated. I have found my niche and provide care to those who are not able to get to the big tent cities. I carry my supplies on my back and can care for more than 75 patients daily. We knock on doors, yell over fences and search anywhere for those in need of treatment. At the end of the day we are sunburned, dehydrated and our feet ache but we look at the pictures we took that day and smile at the lives we might have saved. Then we pack the knapsack for the next day and sleep like a baby. I am sure if I stayed a month I would be busy treating patients every day but after 8 days at this pace I am exhausted and look forward to going home to my family and a vanilla milk shake. This time though I bring home with me a new mission which I can share with others. The orphanage at which I stayed was completely destroyed in the earthquake and they must find a new piece of land and rebuild. There is no home insurance on the orphanage so all funds must be donated. Without their generosity I would not have gone to Haiti and I will ever be grateful for the friendships I made there during this tragic event. I will do what I can to send them money and supplies so they may continue to open their doors to strangers in need. God Bless.

