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Medical missions bring hope, supplies to remote villages

BY JL WATSON

Lee Memorial Health System



GOFORTH

From his office at Lee Memorial Hospital, Gary Goforth, M.D., treats patients and oversees the Florida State University Family Medicine Residency Program at Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Myers. When he's not in the hospital, chances are he is in a remote jungle, desert or other faraway destination.

"I've been doing medical missions since 1986," Dr. Goforth says. "My first mission was in Nigeria where I filled in for a local doctor for six weeks."

In the 30 years since that first trip, he has traveled to numerous countries on every continent except Antarctica. His goal: bring medical supplies and care to people who otherwise would not have access to the help they need. He has loaded up supplies for Russia and trekked through small village in the Philippines; worked with leprosy patients in India and traversed streams in Central America to get where his team needs to go.

"The people we meet are so grateful for our services. We treat a variety of medical conditions seen commonly such as viral syndromes, ear infections, arthritis, but also see illnesses such as malaria, intestinal parasite infections, and conditions seen regularly in developing countries. Many people in remote villages need medication to eliminate worms, a common problem in places that do not have access to clean water supplies." Teams frequently see pregnant patients and occasionally even get to deliver babies.

This year Dr. Goforth and his team went to Honduras, where they treated about 1,400 people in one week. "We work with local pastors as a way to connect with people initially. Once they know who we are, they trust us and when we return, people are waiting for us."

Dr. Goforth and his team bring their supplies and work in any conditions — even outside. One

member of his team used a puppet show to talk to children about the importance of dental hygiene and washing their hands. "We utilize our team in as many ways as we can. We also offer eyeglasses when we have them. On our last trip, a team member who works as an information technology consultant helped fit glasses for over 300 patients."

Family medicine resident Lee Coghill, M.D., has traveled to Nicaragua and went with the team to Honduras this year. "As a physician, seeing a country that has different issues helps me to think of things differently," he says.

Dr. Goforth's next trip later this year will take him to the Dominican Republic. "We are looking forward to it. I like to see the excitement of the physician assistant and medical students as well as our family medicine resident physicians who go because they see that what we do really does change lives." ;
