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Headline: Returning to Haiti: A Continuation of Heartbreak and Hope.

Content:

An island in the Caribbean typically conjures up thoughts of warm, ocean breezes and relaxing beaches. On my third trip to Haiti, however, I knew better. I was well aware that instead of coconut drinks I would be faced with contaminated water, the breeze would not be inviting but rather filled with the smoke and stench of burning garbage and decaying animals. Relaxation would be a far-off dream as I knew that countless hours of caring for and treating others were in store. I had witnessed this devastation and despair twice before, but wanted to return. The people of Haiti are suffering immensely, and I have the ability to help them...which is something I love to do.

Traveling with International Medical Relief, I've learned that in Haiti, no matter how well you've prepared yourself, you must always expect the unexpected. Upon arrival, our original plans to provide aid in the country side location of Les Cayes had to quickly be changed—political unrest had caused the road to be barricaded and deemed unsafe to travel for fear of attack— an instant reminder of the constant dangers surrounding us. We would instead return to the capital city of Port Au Prince. There, as Chief Medical Officer, I would lecture on the common diseases affecting Haiti—Chickenpox and Cholera—as well as educate the team on the food, water, and airborne illnesses we may encounter. It was inevitable that the long days of clinic ahead would end with treating sick team members who fell ill during the trip.

Our first stop was an orphanage. Working with a Haitian doctor there, I saw child after child with severe malnourishment; open, infected wounds from lack of sanitation; and most disturbingly, sexually transmitted diseases. We treated one 7 year old with symptoms of Gonorrhea, which happens when children are raped or sold into prostitution—a heartbreaking reality for many.

As I was leaving the orphanage, I encountered a pregnant woman about to deliver a baby on the street. My Haitian colleague, Dr. Peter and I made the quick decision to pay for her safe transfer to the hospital. When the woman pleaded with the orphanage to take one of her babies, just 6 months old and home alone, sadly the orphanage had to refuse as it was full—one of the many disheartening realities in Haiti that will always linger in my mind.

The following days were spent at the site of the camps that were erected after the 2010 earthquake. They were supposed to be temporary but many still are trying to live in these makeshift tents. An area was quickly cleared so that treatment could begin, and a tarp was put up to shade us from the sun. Soon a never-ending line grew to 300 or more as our team treated the children and adults, many suffering from TB, malaria, anemia caused by malnutrition, burns from falling in the incessant fires, and severe infections because of the unsanitary conditions. We could only afford for a few cases to be sent to the hospital...another extremely difficult task: having to decide who was in most dire need.

My goal was not to just treat the sick patients, though. I wanted to educate them on why they were sick and what they could do about it, with the hope that they would then pass that knowledge on to others, and eventually illness, in part, could be prevented.

The animals in Haiti are also dear to my heart. As an avid animal advocate, witnessing the widespread cruelty and suffering is difficult for me to endure. Used in voo-doo practices, neglected, and left to die, suffering animals line the streets. Knowing I would have to pass them daily, I made sure to bring along dog treats and food with me on the trip, so I could help as many animals as I could in addition to the people.

It is hard for many to imagine these desperate conditions—pictures do not begin to do it justice. To be there in person amongst the turmoil and despair is heart-wrenching, but at the same time beyond rewarding. I truly believe that our gifts are meant to be used to help others. For me, medical mission work is the right thing to do, and I am reminded of that each time I return to the United States, and realize how incredibly blessed and fortunate we are.

Editors note: Before returning to Haiti, Dr. Richline is currently preparing for her next mission trip to Guatemala, where she hopes to bring over 500 pairs of children's shoes to the Mayan families. If you'd like to help, you can drop off a donation of new or gently used children's shoes at her Belvidere office.