



## U.S. doctors say Haiti stands out from other disasters

By Mary Brophy Marcus, USA TODAY

### WHAT THE DOCTORS SAY



**"When you're there, you focus and do the best you can, one patient at a time. When you return and there's a moment just to think ... that's hard."**

***-- pediatrician Arturo Brito, chief medical officer, Children's Health Fund***

Detroit emergency physician Frank McGeorge says nothing could have prepared him for what he saw in Haiti.

Television doesn't do it any justice, says McGeorge, who flew there to help just days after the quake hit Jan. 12. "Unless you're there, you can't really see it, hear it or smell it. The experience is so immersive and painful," he says.

Though it was his first time treating victims of a major catastrophe, even doctors seasoned in treating disaster victims say Haiti was unlike anything they've experienced before.

As the first wave of U.S. physicians who treated Haitian earthquake victims returns from the tiny Caribbean country, many are trying to make sense of their personal feelings. Some talked with USA TODAY about their motivations for going, how helpless they felt at times, how they coped with stress and their awe of the dignity of Haitian patients and medical workers.

McGeorge says he went because he had a drive to help: "Haiti was a lightning rod for any ER physician."

But unlike most health care workers, who operated out of medical tents with other health staff under the umbrella of a non-profit group, McGeorge traveled without medical companions, towing his own supplies, and stayed in an

orphanage 5 miles from the Port-au-Prince airport. A sleeping bag on the ground under mosquito netting served as a bed, and meals included granola bars and bottled water.

### **Not in an American hospital anymore**

"I worked, lived, ate, slept with the people of Haiti," says McGeorge, who relied on young orphan boys to help translate and regretted being without security one day when needy patients swarmed him.

As he rationed strips of gauze, he says, he couldn't help but compare his primitive setup to his Level 1 trauma center back home; now, an entire roll of gauze twined around a single injury seemed extravagant.

Turning patients away for lack of resources was hardest, including a woman with diabetes.

The magnitude of trauma was immense, says pediatrician and public health expert Arturo Brito, chief medical officer of the Children's Health Fund. He spent five days at an airport-based hospital with Project Medishare.

"In the pediatric tent, there were rows and rows of children with amputations, severe wounds and compound fractures. A lot had lost family and many were newly orphaned. It was impossible not to feel," says Brito, who has worked in Haiti numerous times.

Billy Ford, chief of anesthesia at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx, returned last week after five days in Haiti. He says that beyond the reward of helping those in need, the trip had personal meaning. Born in Port-au-Prince, Ford moved to the USA at age 10. He and his two brothers, all physicians, went together to help.

"When we first heard about the earthquake, Henri called and said, 'I'm getting down there,' " says Ford, whose older brother is chief of surgery at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. His other brother, Johns Hopkins pulmonary and critical-care expert Jean, followed a few days later. Ford wasn't far behind.

"My stomach was churning. I felt this uneasiness. Watching the news, the horrific stories, I said, 'I can't watch anymore, I have to do something,' " he says.

He worked in an airport-based medical tent providing surgical anesthesia and pain management. He says that while treating patients, his feelings went on the back burner, but in the quiet moments, it was emotional. "When you look at a little kid with a foot amputation, that makes you want to cry," Ford says.

He says he was touched that so many volunteers worked outside their professional box. "An ophthalmologist was working with the orthopedic surgeons,

treating fractures. A real estate broker learned to use the X-ray machine. It was beautiful to see," Ford says.

### **They can't help everyone**

Some felt they couldn't do enough, including Robert Fuller, chief of emergency medicine at University of Connecticut's John Dempsey Hospital. Fuller worked with the non-profit International Medical Corps. "When you're faced with 800 patients all in pain who haven't gotten a lick of medical care to speak of, you have to steel yourself and get past that," he says.

Many say they were struck by the grace and dedication of the Haitian medical workers, despite their own losses.

"Not a single person I've met who works here did not lose someone in the earthquake," anesthesiologist Michael Ashburn said from Haiti last week. His team from Penn Medicine was working at a Partners in Health hospital 40 miles outside of Port-au-Prince.

Just before leaving Haiti, **Brito's** spirits were lifted by the birth of a healthy baby boy.

"It was such a beautiful sight to see. The father and mother were so happy."