



Stepping Back from the Microscope

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Rosemary Edwards, MD, MPH, FCAP

When Rosemary Edwards, MD, MPH, FCAP, finished her undergraduate degree in biology in 1980, she thought long and hard about the Peace Corps, but practical considerations won out and she went to medical school instead. For two decades, Dr. Edwards put family and career first, waiting until the time was right and her children were grown to think again about third-world medicine.

Then a colleague mentioned that Catholic Health East—a global outreach program that sent medical teams to developing countries—was looking for someone with laboratory and pathology expertise to teach at the medical school program in Haiti. Dr. Edwards made her first 10-day trip in 2001, and she was hooked.

“After the first time, I took some graduate classes in environmental science because I felt I had a very focused vision of health—basically looking down the microscope,” Dr. Edwards says. “I realized that there were a lot of factors influencing health that I knew little about.”

Dr. Edwards was soon introduced to another organization, Partners in Progress, which was working for sustainable development and education in Haiti. The peasants’ association from a rural village called Fondwa requested assistance in establishing laboratory services for their community of 40,000 people.

“There was no reliable power source,” Dr. Edwards says, so she wrote a grant seeking funds to construct a laboratory that used renewable solar energy. “I calculated the electrical requirements and how many solar panels and batteries for back-up we needed,” she said; and it all came together. One foundation funded the solar system, and a CAP Foundation grant in 2003 covered the laboratory equipment necessary to set up point-of-care laboratory testing.

Dr. Edwards received a second CAP Foundation grant for the clinic in Fondwa in 2006. “For my MPH project, I worked with the community to set up an HIV program that provided testing, education, counseling, and treatment referrals,” she says.

In 2005, Dr. Edwards had accepted a position at Butler Memorial Hospital in Butler, Pennsylvania, where she now practices. In September of 2007, she took a one-year leave of absence to serve as executive director of Hospice Saint Joseph in Port au Prince, which focuses on health and education programs.

“Often, we would serve as advocates for people from rural areas, where they had very little access to any kind of health care,” Dr. Edwards says. “Every day was different and challenging. I never billed myself as a primary care physician; but when you’re there, nobody else is, and somebody walks in with a problem, you do your best.” To explain what that can mean, Dr. Edwards describes her experience helping one family obtain blood for transfusion in Port au Prince.

“Once a month, a mother and her two daughters would come from their village and stay with us,” Dr. Edwards remembers. “Both of the girls had sickle cell, and this time the older sister desperately needed a transfusion. The hospital had no blood bank services, so we had to obtain the specimen from the child and hand-deliver it to the Haitian Red Cross Center an hour away. We waited there for six hours before the blood became available, then had to go out on the street and buy ice in a plastic container, return to the blood bank for the blood, and return with it to the hospital. The next day our patient needed another unit and we had to do the whole thing over again. If we hadn’t done this, the child probably would have died. She had no other options.”

Since the January 2010 earthquake, conditions are even worse, Dr. Edward says; her colleagues in Fondwa and Port au Prince have been working out of tents. “The health care facilities, including the labs and HIV program,” she says, “were completely destroyed.”

In the future, Dr. Edward hopes to continue to work in pathology practice in the United States for about half the year and spend the rest of her time volunteering in Haiti and other developing countries. She will return to Haiti for two weeks on September 5. Pathologists with an interest in joining the effort might contact the CAP Foundation Task Force for Haiti; its members are knowledgeable about groups working there now and what skills are needed.

To learn more about contributing to humanitarian efforts in Haiti, please contact Arlene Strong at the CAP Foundation: astrong@cap.org.