

POSTCARDS FROM THE FRONTIERS OF PATHOLOGY

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Dr. Zarka and the Village of a Thousand Voices

People started lining up before dawn. Many had come hundreds of miles, some traveling for days to hear the American and Australian doctors who had something new to say about the latest threat to Africa's survival.

Cancer now claims more lives in developing countries each year than AIDS, tuberculosis or malaria. More than 12 million new cases of cancer were diagnosed in 2008, with 7.6 million deaths among them. 60 percent of the deaths occurred in developing countries, where poor medical infrastructure often means cancer is a death sentence.¹

Matt Zarka simply finds that unacceptable, and he's asked the CAP Foundation and the Papanicolaou Society of Cytopathology to help him do something about it.

Matt is a poster child for the transformative role of the pathologist in healthcare delivery—he's there for patients in whatever ways he's needed. Not only is he an essential *part* of the patient care team, in some cases he is the patient care team.

A highly respected cytopathologist at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona, he has spent much of the last decade

donating his time and talent to practicing the art of pathology in places where it's a true luxury to have any diagnostic data on which to base treatment.



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Matt Zarka

Doctors in the developing world have few measures and means: You find a breast lump, you cut it out, and you hope for the best.

When Dr. Andrew Field, Director of Cytopathology at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, Australia founded the African Cytology Tutorial Series in 2007, Matt had never been to Africa. In fact, Muhimbili University in Dar Es Salaam Tanzania is about as far away

¹ Source: Axios International 2009

from Scottsdale, Arizona as you can get.

Or is it?

“I am always at home in the company of other pathologists,” says Zarka. “It’s not important where we’ve been trained. Politics and religion just don’t matter. It’s the fellowship of the microscope, and it really works.”

So on January 8, 2008, Drs. Zarka and Field stared into a room of 38 pathologists eager to learn about fine needle aspiration biopsy. Rwanda has two pathologists (in a country of 9 million people.) One of those pathologists attended. Tanzania’s 36 million people are served by 18 pathologists; 16 attended.

Over the next three days Matt and Andrew tutored on breast, thyroid, salivary gland, bone and soft tissue, and lymph node lesion biopsies, performing 50 FNAs.

Zarka speaks with passion: “Pathologists in Africa lack the financial resources to attend meetings outside the African continent. These workshops are a lifeline. You have 15% of the world’s population with very limited if any access to the most basic diagnostic methods.”

The tutorials have spawned the creation of the West African Society of Cytology. In October, the East African Cytology Society will hold its first scientific meeting. And more tutorials are planned for 2009 in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

Mèdecins Sans Frontiers, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and among the best known volunteer physician organizations, operates on a principle that suits perfectly the work that Matt and Andrew are doing: “MSF rejects the idea that developing countries deserve third-rate medical care.”

While Africa might have been foreign to Matt, this concept was not.

In 1999 Matt had found himself in the village of Pochutla in Oaxaca, Mexico working with other volunteers, nurses and a few doctors, to perform Pap tests—up to 250 per day—under challenging conditions. (Matt is fourth from the right in this photo from a later time.)



“It was hard to get supplies—stains and other chemicals especially. At one point, I was ready to use paint thinner to clean the slides. The lines of women waiting were endless. So even though conditions were rough, we had to keep going.”



Before Zarka arrived, it took six to twelve months to get Pap test results. As he explained, “Most of the results came back negative. But this flew in the face of very high cervical cancer rates in Mexico. We knew something was wrong.”

In fact, cervical cancer is the number one cause of cancer death in women in Latin America—with rates 30 times higher than in the United States.

Considering the gravity of the situation and the depth of need, one might expect Matt’s presence in Mexico to be the result of a massive mobilization to attack the problem.

But Matt was in Mexico because of a golf game.

He’d had a chance meeting while serving as the Director of Cytology and Anatomic Pathology at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

“Life is full of spider webs; connections exist where you least expect them. I was playing golf with Jon Wettstein, COO of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, who suggested I

meet Dan Cox, the founder of Coffee Enterprises. Cox and Wettstein wanted to do something for the health of their workers on coffee plantations in Latin America. So I took a trip with Dr. Francis Fote, a wonderful OB/GYN, and some other volunteers to Pochutla, and we never looked back.”

Grounds for Health (as in coffee grounds) was the result. From 1999-2006, Matt and his colleagues saw thousands of patients in villages across Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Chiapas, Mexico, organizing week-long cervical cancer screening campaigns. When possible, they also provided colposcopy and treatment. GFH continues its work today.

The CAP Foundation is considering a humanitarian grant to help Matt and his colleagues continue their FNA tutorials in Africa. For those of us immersed in helping plan the College’s PATH Forward and the transformation of the specialty, Dr. Zarka’s story is not only inspirational, but instructive. A few dedicated, talented people can make an enormous difference in a short period of time.

For those who might question whether change can flow so freely here in the States, where our transformation begins, I’d say this: If we’re on the side of the angels, if we’re there for patients, we will prevail. Many of you know that this belief gets me up every morning.

See, Test, and Treat, the College's US-based cancer screening resource, helps put us on the side of the angels.

During the See, Test and Treat event, women receive a pelvic exam, along with a Pap test to detect any potential early signs of cervical cancer and a mammogram for early detection of breast cancer. A patient advocate meets privately with each patient to give her the results along with a grocery store gift certificate and a See, Test and Treat t-shirt.

In the months and years to come, we'll be launching new programs and scaling existing humanitarian efforts. The need is great, as are the benefits to the College: the more patients know who we are, what we do, and why we're invaluable, the greater the likelihood that we'll draw others to our cause, make our presence known among policymakers, and secure the future of pathology.

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“We need to be there for patients. We need to be there for patients. We need to be there for patients.”

Thousands of voices from the villages of Oaxaca would rejoice that this is Matt Zarka's mantra.

Charles Roussel is the Executive Vice President at the College of American Pathologists and can be reached at crousse@cap.org.