

# FOR THE PEOPLE

## Vital Surgery, Precious Teaching — To Go

For 14 UNC doctors and nurses who took vacation and unpaid leave to travel to Kampala, Uganda, for two weeks in October, the trip was a chance to make a big difference in a country where few children with heart conditions get the medical care they need — and a chance to remember a lost friend.

Ugandan children with heart conditions had nowhere to go for medical care. The medical staff at Mulago hospital, the largest state hospital in the country, did not have the training or medical equipment to perform surgeries that are common in the U.S. The Ugandan children either went without surgery or traveled to other countries, including India or South Africa, if their families could afford it.

And Dr. Keith Kocis, a pediatrician in UNC's pediatric intensive care unit, didn't know anything about global health. But when he learned from the family of Amal Murarka, a UNC doctor who died in a car accident in 2003, that Murarka had done research in Uganda, he started thinking about that country.

"As we tried to make some sense of that situation, it had a big impact on myself and folks in the ICU," Kocis said. "We wanted to keep his memory alive."

Kocis and others formed the Dr. Amal Murarka International Pediatric Health Foundation. Through donations from Murarka's father, other friends, family members and co-workers, and with sponsorship from corporate partners, Kocis was able to take a team to Uganda for the first time in the spring of 2005.

After the first trip, he knew there was a gap volunteers from Chapel Hill could fill.

He partnered with Dr. Craig Sable, a pediatric cardiologist at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., who had done medical work in the Mulago hospital. The doctors worked together to establish a pediatric intensive care unit and surgical unit. They recruited specialized medical personnel, including a pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon, surgeon assistants, an anesthesiologist, perfusionists, intensivists, physical therapists and pediatric nurse practitioners.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TEAM MEMBERS OF UNC PROJECT UGANDA

The medical team that traveled with Kocis in October took most of a hospital with them. Kocis worked with Samaritan's Purse, a nondenominational evangelical Christian organization based in Boone that provides international relief and medical aid, to arrange the shipment of a cargo airplane's worth of equipment and supplies. The medical team checked another 36 bags worth of supplies for the flight.

**Clockwise from top: Dr. Michael Mill performs surgery wearing Tar Heel regalia; Esther, a Sudanese refugee, shows her gratitude for her operation; Karla Brown '87 coaches Ugandan nurses; and Dr. Keith Kocis works the telecommunications end of the mission.**

With infrastructure and equipment in place, Kocis and his team embarked on a two-week mission to perform 11 open-heart surgeries on children ranging from 4 months to 16 years old. All 11 surgeries were successful.

But they also went to teach the Ugandan medical staff. Each specialist had a Ugandan counterpart he or she trained and coached. At the end of the trip, the Ugandan medical team could perform the surgeries on its own.

"What I like about this trip is that we are helping the children and creating a self-sufficient program," said Dr. Michael Mill, the pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon who performed and oversaw the surgeries.

"Before last year, there had not been surgeries like this done. We are really trying to help improve the medical system there."



The five nurses who made the trip prepared lessons to share with Ugandan nurses.

"It was nice because they got more in-depth information," said Karla Brown '87, a pediatric nurse practitioner in the cardiothoracic surgery division. "We acted not as the primary nurses this time but as the coaches."

Brown said the nurses she trained worked extremely long hours but were always happy to be there and enthusiastic about learning.

"The nurses just soaked up everything. They would flank you to see what you were doing," Brown said.

The Americans found their reward in patients such as Esther, a 16-year-old Sudanese girl who came to Uganda as a refugee after she lost her family to violence in Sudan. An American doctor who had heard about the team's work recommended Esther for the surgery and helped her get to the hospital.

Brown said Esther asked for a piece of paper after her surgery. She then asked Brown to tell her the first and last names of each doctor and nurse who worked on her so she could thank each person. While she was in the hospital, Esther told the medical staff she wanted to be a teacher one day, but by the end of her time there, she had changed her mind. Now she wants to be a doctor.

"She was very talkative when she recovered," Kocis said. "She was a precocious young adult. She was a sweet girl, and her circumstances, being an orphan, that's all part of who she was and how special she was."

Other team members were touched by the gratitude expressed by the patients' families.

Dr. Benny Joyner '93, a pediatric fellow who works in the pediatric intensive care unit at UNC, remembers the gratitude of the mother of one patient who dressed in ornate tribal clothing as an expression of thanks because, without the surgery, her child would have died.

"It's just a different level of appreciation than you see in the U.S.," Joyner said. "I think it really does humble you in terms of the advantages you have."

Kocis hopes to take a group from UNC annually in the fall, and he says Sable plans to lead a group from his hospital each spring. Kocis said the team will need steady funding and continued support from corporate sponsors, particularly for travel and housing in Uganda.

UNC staff would like to teach the Ugandans increasingly difficult techniques so they can perform a wider range of surgeries and improve the surgical capabilities of their staff and their hospital's infrastructure. They also want to set up telecommunications for teaching.

"The people are here, they want to go, and we are advancing the program as quickly as we can," Kocis said

*To see more pictures and read about the team members' experience in Uganda, visit their blog: [uncugandateam.blogspot.com](http://uncugandateam.blogspot.com).*

— Elizabeth Templin



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