



Building Global Links for Local Health

Emily Nichelson-Boots

PITTSBURGH, April 21 (Global Links) – In Guatemala, doctors at a remote public health center receive a shipment of medical aid that includes 20 beds and mattresses, 20 overbed tables (a first for this hospital), an exam table, a food-delivery cart, and two refrigerators to store vaccines -- a precious gift that the Guatemalan hospital administrators are ecstatic to receive -- along with other furnishings and many boxes of critically needed supplies. That all of these items could just as easily have ended up in a landfill is what keeps the staff and volunteers at Global Links committed to their mission.

Through the recovery of medical surplus in U.S. hospitals and carefully planned shipments, Global Links, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization, helps to improve public health in developing countries.

Since 1989, the organization has collected unused supplies and other medical material from hospitals in Western Pennsylvania and the surrounding region to prepare more than 300 40-foot sea container shipments (3,000 tons of materials) to medical facilities overseas. The monetary value of each of these shipments is in the tens or hundreds of thousands in U.S. dollars but to the hospitals and clinics that receive these materials, the value is much greater. Global Links offers hospitals and clinics in developing countries the opportunity to provide better care to their patients through the donation of critically needed equipment, supplies and furnishings.

Hospitals in the United States who donate surplus materials receive the dual benefit of reducing their carbon footprint by better waste management, and extending their life-saving reach to include communities in less developed countries. Working closely with the Pan

American Health Organization (PAHO) the Inter-American base of the World Health Organization (WHO), Global Links provides targeted medical aid to nine developing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

According to Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, an average hospital patient in the United States generates 25 pounds of waste a day. Much of that material is unused – and some of it is usable. Global Links makes these unused materials available to less developed countries, where there are shortages of even the most basic medical supplies and equipment.

The sight of two pregnant women in labor sharing one bed in a hospital overseas, an infant laying on a bare mattress, or a sign outside of the O.R. stating that surgeries are canceled for the day because of a lack of gauze or sutures – these realities reinforce Global Links' mission in co-founder Kathleen Hower's mind. The high cost and lack of foreign exchange in most developing countries makes it financially impossible for hospitals to replace old beds, rusting exam tables, broken gurneys, or purchase the appropriate quantities of necessary supplies. The equipment in these clinics is often outdated or no longer manufactured, making basic maintenance impossible, and the high cost of replacement out of reach.

"People are quite literally dying for the lack of what we throw away," says Hower.

During her travels, she sees firsthand the desperate need for medical aid. In many places, people must buy their own sutures for surgery. Bandages, thermometers, needles, and other basic medical materials are often unavailable or in short supply. The donated materials also provide weary patients a bit of comfort. Some people travel long distances from rural villages over unpaved roads in poor condition to receive medical care, often walking many miles to even reach an unpaved road. There they must wait for a public bus, hitchhike, or continue walking. Families with a sick child or a wife or daughter who is in labor may travel for miles only to find there are no chairs in the waiting room, no linens for the bed, and maybe not even a bed. Rural hospitals can serve a large geographic area and are often ill-equipped and lacking even basic supplies and furnishings -- chairs in the waiting rooms or patient rooms, linens for the bed, bedside stands, wheelchairs -- items taken for granted in hospitals or clinics in the United States.

Building relationships with hospital administrators during site visits is crucial for success, says Hower. It's important to listen, to ask questions. Don't promise something that you will not be able to deliver. She reports that public officials in developing nations are often skeptical of non-governmental organizations that tour their countries and promise support; after raising expectations, the countries never receive it, or worse, receive materials that are in poor condition and cannot be used.

Each medical facility that receives aid is visited by a Global Links officer and in-country public health officials to tour the facility and understand the needs of the community. A detailed needs list is developed with the hospital staff. Upon returning to the U.S., an actual packing list is developed with other key staff members based on the needs list and current and expected inventory. A shipping date is proposed, and preparation begins. A shipment sent to Jamaica in February, for instance, included 20 beds and mattresses, listed as one of their greatest needs as they had not replaced their beds in more than 50 years. One hospital in Nicaragua recently asked Global Links to replace surgical instruments that had been in use since the 1970s. And another hospital in Honduras now has delivery tables where women can safely and comfortably deliver their babies, and new beds and mattresses help ease overcrowded maternity wards.

Hower stresses the importance of sending materials that the hospitals will be able to use. The mentality that "anything is better than nothing" is flawed, she says. "Sending the wrong thing is worse than sending nothing."

The organization must consider each hospital's individual needs or specific requests to create a list of supplies for shipment. Some equipment may be too complicated or expensive for clinics to use, and too expensive to maintain. Unsolicited or incomplete medical materials, though well-intentioned, can create another burden for hospitals, as most have no incinerators and the countries have limited waste-disposal systems to discard useless items once the shipment has been received.

Enormous care is taken to sort supplies at Global Links facility. Small medical instruments are separated and prepared for shipment by skilled volunteers. By all accounts, sorting and packing are complicated tasks. More than 1,500 volunteers donate an average of 5,000 hours to Global Links each year. Global Links employs eight full-time and seven part-time staff, and their outreach is growing. Last

year, the organization assembled 25 shipments, and they hope to send 30 in 2008.

The increasing popularization of "greening" U.S. hospitals over the past decade has helped to strengthen Global Links' mission. Seventeen hospitals in Western Pennsylvania and surrounding areas currently work with Global Links, and other hospitals in the United States are also starting to enforce policies to become more environmentally conscious.

The more hospitals give, certainly, the more their positive impact on the healthcare systems of developing nations and actions to improve the health of our planet will grow. By sharing these unused supplies, recovered equipment and furnishings with Global Links, hospitals not only reduce waste, but help to increase access to healthcare for thousands of underserved communities internationally.

Emily Nicholson-Boots is a former OneWorld intern who now volunteers for Global Links.

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About Global Links

Global Links is a not-for-profit organization that recovers surplus medical materials from U.S. hospitals and makes them available to hospitals that serve the poorest members of society in less developed countries. Since 1989, it has channeled medical materials worth more than \$133 million to more than 70 countries around the world, with a concentration in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information on Global Links, visit www.globallinks.org or call 412-361-3424 x204.

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