

Vancouver's \$1 million funds medical help in Ethiopia

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More trained specialists identified as key in the country, where part of money will go to training local doctors

By DON CAYO, Vancouver Sun September 17, 2012



Dr. Rick Hodes administers deworming medication in Chilo, Ethiopia. Vancouver businessman and philanthropist Gary Segal has become a personal friend of the American physician, who works with a Jewish non-profit agency and Mother Teresa's hospital in Addis Ababa to provide specialized care for sick Ethiopian children.

Photograph by: Richard Lord , Vancouver Sun

Voluntary work done by doctors and other professionals from the developed world does a great deal of good in poorer parts of the world, but "service is not development," warns the head of the University of B.C.'s Branch of International Surgery.

"Development requires that something be left behind when the people doing the service have gone home," Dr. Bob Taylor told me last week at a lunch organized by Vancouver philanthropist Gary Segal.

Taylor was there to meet another of my lunchmates, Manlio Dell'Araccia, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Rome-based country head for Ethiopia. Their aim was to figure out how UBC can both

send more surgeons to help meet the country's unmet needs and leave something of lasting value behind through a well-thought-out transfer of skills.

Segal was there to write the cheques that can make it happen. He presented Taylor with \$100,000 — about 10 per cent of the net take from his first international fundraiser, a dinner for the who's who of Vancouver last April. The rest of the money is going to support Dell'Araccia's JDC work in Ethiopia — specifically the work of Dr. Rick Hodes.

Hodes is the American physician I wrote about last January. Based in Addis Ababa, he divides his time between an odd combination of institutions — the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which is a globally active U.S.-based charity, and an Addis Ababa hospital run by Mother Teresa's order of nuns. He specializes in difficult spine deformations, heart problems and cancers, and uses the funds raised internationally on his behalf to send patients to countries such as India, Ghana and even Canada for surgeries that can't be done in Ethiopia.

Much of the million Segal raised will be used to further this work, but some of it — in particular the money donated to Taylor's international surgery branch — will take the initiative to the next level.

“An aim of our organization is to create facilities where people can be treated without having to send them away,” Dell'Araccia said. “We also want to identify spine problems in the early stages when medical intervention can be less expensive. And we want to determine why the incidence of these problems is so high in Ethiopia.”

Taylor said having more trained specialists was the top priority identified by a recent World Health Organization analysis in Ethiopia.

For one thing, accessible local care would be far cheaper than sending patients abroad.

“There will always be some cases that can't be treated in Ethiopia, or even nearby countries,” he said. “But at an earlier stage a lot of them could be.”

I observed to both of them that \$100,000 — or even the whole of the million dollars Segal raised — sounds like a drop in the bucket in the context of medical or university budgets in Canada.

Not so in Ethiopia, Dell'Araccia responded.

“With \$100,000 you can do many things. You can send more children abroad for surgery. You can give more scholarships to students who have completed high school. You can put a school in a rural area where children are studying under the trees. You can dig a large number of wells to provide uncontaminated water to many, many people.”

And Taylor noted that the \$100,000 UBC is getting will also go a long way, given that almost all Canadians involved in international surgery volunteer their time. As a result, it doesn't cost much to send surgeons to Ethiopia to not only do complex work, but also pass on skills to local doctors.

“So it sounds like a lot of money to me.”

dcayo@vancouver.sun.com

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