



## PARTNERSHIP FOR ERITREA

# Bringing hope, and health care, to Africa

A new partnership between the GW Medical Center, Children's National Medical Center (CNMC), Physicians for Peace and the Eritrean Ministry of Health/Orotta School of Medicine is building a sustainable health care infrastructure for the sub-Saharan African country of Eritrea. The program is called *Partnership for Eritrea*, but as Jim Scott, dean of the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences, says, "We have an opportunity to broaden the breadth of our capacity as practitioners, leaders and individuals."

BY LINDA DENT

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN M. KATZ

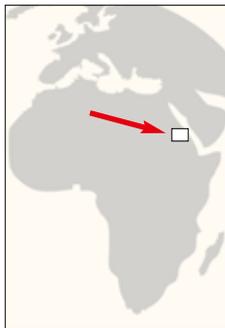


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Imagine a country a little larger than Pennsylvania that is occupied by 4.9 million people—about twice the number of people who live in Chicago and nine times the number of people who live in the nation’s capital. The nearly 5 million people who live in this “Pennsylvania-size” area are served by a cadre of five pediatricians, four obstetricians and seven surgeons—the remaining general practitioner physicians often are called on to perform surgeries and be a pediatrics resource.



IN RAW NUMBERS, about five physicians serve 100,000 people—a dramatic number when compared to U.S. statistics—the same 100,000 people are served by 256 physicians. When faced with such daunting challenges, many would surrender the fight. However, in the sub-Saharan African country of **ERITREA**, the Minister of Health has waged an extraordinary battle against the health care limits his country faces, reaching across continents for willing supporters of his plan to beat the odds for his people.



Already Minister of Health Saleh Meki has shown he can produce lasting change. Eritrea boasts one of the highest vaccina-

tion rates in all of Africa. And, his efforts have resulted in an infant mortality rate of 46.3 per 1,000, a true achievement when compared to the rate of 104 deaths per 1,000 births in some areas in western sub-Saharan Africa.

Significant improvements have been made through Eritrea’s tiered system of regional health stations, clinics and hospitals to provide health service to the Eritrean people. In 2003, the Ministry of Health opened the Orotta School of Medicine. Recognizing that the current crop of students soon would graduate, the Ministry of Health moved toward the next step—post-graduate medical education training programs for specialist physicians.

Typically, at this stage, international students travel abroad for advanced training. Too frequently, the newly minted physicians do not return to their home

countries, health care needs fail to be addressed and a country’s health conditions continue to worsen.

The new partnership between the GW Medical Center, Children’s National Medical Center (CNMC), Physicians for Peace and the Eritrean Ministry of Health/Orotta School of Medicine hopes to break from the “brain drain” cycle and create a program that will provide in-country training and ultimately build a sustainable health care infrastructure. Further, the *Partnership for Eritrea* hopes to create a program that can be used as a model for other developing countries.

“From something little, something big is going to grow,” said Dr. Jim Scott, dean of the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences, as he cut the ribbon at the December 2007 opening of the office of post-graduate medical education programs

in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. “We are honored to be part of this project and the Ministry of Health’s vision to build the human resource capacity in Eritrea and we are excited to help the Minister in his efforts to create a strong health care workforce.”

“We think our problems are so immense, yet, here we have a small country, with limited resources, and already they have done wonderful things,” said Dr. Mark Batshaw, CNMC medical director, calling attention to the 84 percent vaccination rate.

“We are designing a program with the Eritreans, not importing a traditional U.S. program,” said CNMC pediatrician Dr. Ellie Hamburger. “Our Eritrean colleagues

and the driving force behind the partnership, will continue his work as medical director for the program and will be based in Asmara. GW recruited surgeon Dr. Fatima Khambaty and pediatrician Dr. Jennifer Egelseer as the first teaching faculty, each committing a year to work in Eritrea. Dr. Hamburger, and surgeons Drs. Stanley Knoll and Juliet Lee are working

GW’s Office of International Medicine Programs. Dr. Ayas and others are hopeful that GW’s vast network of trained specialists will come forward for two-to-four-week visits to Eritrea to act as visiting faculty. She said that Physicians for Peace will provide initial resources to support the training but acknowledged that the program’s financial needs are still great.

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—Dr. Jim Scott, dean of the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences



are insightful people who have identified their needs and are working with us and Physicians for Peace to design and implement a program that will be effective in the short and long term.”

“They want to move away from the old model of everyone being general practitioners and toward a model where physicians can provide specialized care,” said Dr. Brian McGrath, associate dean for GW’s Graduate Medical Education. Therefore, the first group to receive the training is drawn from existing Eritrean general practitioners—those who are now called on for Surgery and Pediatrics. The initial training will focus on pediatric and surgical specialties with the hope of including additional specialty training in the future. The “first class of pediatric residents” includes seven physicians who are not novices to the medical profession—each has between 10 and 17 years of general practice experience.

Dr. Haile Mezghebe, a surgeon of Eritrean descent from Howard University

with Eritrean faculty and the Ministry of Health to develop the curriculum.

“While we will not be offering an identical U.S. curriculum in Eritrea, we will offer a quality program tantamount to that which we offer here,” said Dr. Scott, “and it will be tailored to Eritrean physicians.”

“A general surgeon in Eritrea has broader responsibilities than a general surgeon in the U.S.,” says Dr. McGrath. “A general surgeon in Eritrea must do a combination of orthopaedic, neurological and thoracic surgeries as well as Cesarean sections.”

“It is important that Eritrean physicians not only receive specialized training but also that they receive training in how to teach other Eritrean physicians,” said Dr. Hamburger, “if we are going to help the Minister of Health create the health care infrastructure and workforce that he envisions.”

“We will need existing faculty, GW alumni and other specialists to fill this need in training surgeons as well as pediatricians,” said Huda Ayas, EdD, executive director of

“We also are recruiting people who are looking at this exciting project as a learning experience for themselves,” said Dr. Ayas. “They are going to be learning from the Eritreans at the same time that they are teaching.”

“We have a unique opportunity to make a profound impact in this country,” said Dr. Scott. “And, we have an opportunity to broaden the breadth of our capacity as practitioners, leaders and individuals.”

*Editor’s Note: Alumni and others willing to join the partnership and spend two weeks in Eritrea should contact Dr. Ayas at [imphma@gwumc.edu](mailto:imphma@gwumc.edu) or call 202-994-2796. From something small, something big can grow.*

#### **Ways You Can Help the Partnership with Eritrea:**

- Volunteer your time and become a visiting faculty member.
- Donate medical equipment.
- Offer financial support.
- Email: [imphma@gwumc.edu](mailto:imphma@gwumc.edu) to learn more.