

JCCC delegation finds needs, transformation in Uganda

Five representatives from JCCC were part of a fact-finding delegation April 30-May 11 to Uganda, exploring opportunities for exchange and service.

Mary Smith and Kathy Carver, nursing professors; Dr. Joe Sopcich, vice president, Institutional Advancement and Government Affairs; Stu Beals, professor, interactive media; and Dr. David Zamierowski, physician adviser, nursing program, from JCCC, joined Dr. Martha Baird, clinical assistant professor, and Vicki Hicks, clinical nurse specialist, University of Kansas School of Nursing; and Dr. Tom Spiegel, attending physician and instructor, emergency medicine department, University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska Medical Center, representing Medical Missions.

Uganda has suffered massive human rights violations in its recent past, including an eight-year reign by Idi Amin Dada in the 1970s and internal atrocities against civilians from rebel groups fighting the government. The Lord's Resistance Army's activity, which has subsided but still exists, is notorious for its abduction of children to serve as soldiers or sex slaves and its brutal murders and mutilations used to control local populations. As a result of the unrest and refugees from other African countries, an estimated 1.4-1.6 million people are displaced, living in Internally Displaced Persons camps, resulting in tremendous needs for social services and medical care.

"There is so much need," Carver said. "There are no good roads, no jobs and no running water, only wells located 10 miles apart. People live in camp settings, IDPs, for protection. A whole generation has been lost as children were taken prisoners and those who remain are traumatized by exposure to rebels."

Between wars and AIDS, the average life expectancy is 51.5 years, according to Sopcich. The median age of the population is 15 with 50 percent of the population under age 14.

"In the midst of all this, hope still exists," Sopcich said.

The group chose to visit Uganda because of a longtime friendship between Zamierowski and Father Tony Wach, a Jesuit priest building a high school in Gulu. In Gulu, the group also visited the government's Gulu University and its medical school as well as the Catholic diocese's Lacor Hospital with its associated nursing school. Lacor Hospital is known for its containment of the Ebola virus in 2000 and treatment of refugees.



Children come and go at the displaced persons camp at the Awach medical clinic.

"In talking to nuns at the Lacor Hospital's nursing school, we found out there are three faculty per 220 students," Carver said.

As guests of The Hon. R. Reagan Okumu, a Uganda parliament representative from Gulu, whose wife, Jane Kilat, attended college in Kansas, the delegation was able to meet with high-level administrators in the government, other hospitals and nonprofit groups, including the Invisible Children headquarters. Okumu escorted the group to his home village, Bucoro, close to a school and church where people had been buried alive in a mass grave and to a high-level government clinic at Awach. Another JCCC-Uganda contact is Dr. Katie Rhoads, a surgeon formerly practicing in Overland Park, now in Africa.

So what is the next step for JCCC involvement?

Sopcich says there are a number of challenges to JCCC service, especially considering students – distance, disease, political unrest and expense. He feels the first opportunity may be fundraising. JCCC students already have raised money for Invisible Children, intended to rescue child soldiers.

In Uganda itself, Beals says the most immediate objective is a fence around the Awach Hospital, which is not well-staffed or equipped by the government because patients won't go there as they don't feel secure. A fence would decrease the hospital's likelihood as a target by rebel groups.

According to Carver, JCCC and KU nursing faculty are looking into exchange and collaboration with Ugandan health care education programs.



Back row left to right: Stu Beals, Dr. David Zamierowski, Dr. Joe Sopcich, Dr. Tom Spiegel, Ronald Reagan Okumu. Front Row: Mary Smith, Dr. Martha Baird, Vicki Hicks, Dr. Katie Rhoads, Kathy Carver.



Children play outside Mass at the Catholic church in Gulu.

“In Uganda nurses are called to care for a much larger number of patients than we are accustomed to, and they must coordinate with families, who sleep outside, to assist in providing the physical care and meals,” Smith said. “Our ability to work with Northern Uganda and nursing education there could teach us about diversity, post traumatic stress from war and dealing with tropical diseases that we rarely see here in the United States. Nursing and the art of caring is universal, and the bond we were able to feel from the health care providers and patients was indeed welcoming and heartfelt.”

One part of Beals’ Senior Scholar Project will look at JCCC initiatives to support Uganda. Spiegel was looking at a potential surgical mission trip to Gulu for Medical Missions.

“There is a tremendous need in Gulu after years of war ravaged and depleted their resources,” Spiegel said. “With the area finally at peace during the last couple of years, there is tremendous potential for sharing, mutual learning and clinical opportunities in a beautiful land with warm, welcoming and friendly people.”

“After being in Uganda, we will never



A mother and her child await treatment in the Awach medical clinic.

look at life the same way,” Carver said. “Right now we are getting organized and taking small steps to develop our resources. We want to be a collaborative force with other resources here and in Uganda, not working in isolated cells.” **Im**