Online Resource For Volunteering Abroad In Pediatric Surgery

The first website designed for pediatric surgeons who want to volunteer abroad has been unveiled.

Developed by pediatric surgeon Marilyn Butler, MD, of Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford, the Global Paediatric Surgery Network (http://globalpaediatricsurgery.org) helps pediatric surgeons worldwide find volunteer opportunities and also provides resources to make their efforts more effective.

"The main goal is matching up the needs of the surgeons in developing countries with the pediatric surgeons who want to volunteer," Butler said. A clinical associate professor of pediatric surgery at Stanford University School of Medicine, Butler has been on surgical trips to China and Vietnam on several occasions.

Using the website, pediatric surgeons can plan or join volunteer trips to specific countries or regions where there is a demand for their services. They can post their availability, and individuals and groups from developing countries can post their needs. The website also provides surgeons in these regions with access to a large number of online journals, videos, webinars and other electronic tools that are relevant to their profession and may be difficult to find where they practice.

Of 362 pediatric surgeons who responded to a survey Butler conducted last fall, 70 percent said they were interested in doing international volunteer work.

Meanwhile, more than half said they had never volunteered internationally before. Given this discrepancy, Butler believes the network could usher in a new wave of global volunteerism among pediatric surgeons.

Butler was inspired to develop the network after attending a conference of the Pacific Association of Pediatric Surgeons two years ago in Jackson, Wyo. During a session on international volunteerism, one of the speakers recounted his humanitarian efforts in Ecuador. An audience member announced that he had volunteered there, too. "A visiting professor stood up and said, 'Well, I'm from Ecuador, and I didn't know either one of you were there,'" Butler recalled, adding that she had this thought: "What if there's a way to coordinate all of this, so people are not randomly going here and there, thither and yon?"

A global volunteerism clearinghouse for pediatric surgeons seemed a crying need. Six years before, Butler herself had gone through what she described as the "random experience" of volunteering abroad, when she joined a group of physicians and health educators on a trip to Vietnam.

"I spent the first week and a half seeing a lot of Vietnam, visiting a bunch of hospitals, not feeling like I had much to contribute," Butler said. "And then the last week I was there, I ended up in H? Chi Minh City, where I visited a children's hospital. They didn't know I was coming. They didn't know anything about me, and I didn't know anything about them."

She hopes the network, which invites current and past volunteers to contribute information about their experiences and findings to a knowledge base, will bring continuity and efficiency to various volunteer pediatric surgery efforts happening in the same place.

"The idea is that if another pediatric surgeon wishes to work in the same region, he or she could read an entry on the website and learn how to connect with the local pediatric surgeons," Butler said. "By reading about work that has previously been done, that surgeon might work more efficiently by collaborating with other surgeons or by benefitting from needs assessments that have already been done."

The network contains links to nearly 100 pediatric surgery societies around the world, from Paraguay to Nigeria to Belarus. Prospective volunteers will be able to visit a host of travel-related sites linked to the network to get information about, say, travel documents, vaccinations and the local culture.

The network also will help volunteers assess the surgical needs of the regions they are visiting. "It is critical to involve the local surgeons with any plans you have to assist. They need to tell you what they want to learn, and you need to make sure they have the skills or the equipment or the facilities that are needed," Butler said.

Butler, who handles a full-time surgical caseload, hired a San Francisco-based company to design the website, which she can update using a content-management system. But she is, for now, the sole driver behind the project. "It fills my nights and weekends," she said. "But it's my passion."

The Global Paediatric Surgery Network is supported by the Pacific Association of Pediatric Surgeons and Stanford University's Department of Surgery and Division of Pediatric Surgery.

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