

BWH Bulletin

For and about the People of Brigham and Women's Hospital

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A Team with Heart



Back from left, Ceeya Patton-Bolman, Susan Hall and Leslie Sabatino with children in Rwanda during a visit in October.

Suffering from rheumatic heart disease, 8-year-old Louise was too weak to even blow out a candle. Doctors feared she would die, and so did she. Her condition is all too common in Rwanda, a country in sub-Saharan Africa, where thousands are slowly suffocating from rheumatic heart disease as a result of untreated streptococcal infections, such as strep throat.

"Rheumatic heart disease is just as serious a health problem in Rwanda as HIV/AIDS," said Leslie Sabatino, BSN, RN, of Tower 8CD. "There are no medical facilities in Rwanda that can perform heart surgery on these patients, and very few in all of sub-Saharan Africa."

BWH, in collaboration with Partners In Health, is hoping to help a Rwandan hospital change that. This spring, a team of nurses, physicians, respiratory therapists, perfusionists and others are volunteering to travel to Kigali, Rwanda, to perform heart surgery on 10 to 15 patients suffering from rheumatic heart disease. For the next seven to 10 years, Team Heart will work with King Faisal Hospital in Kigali and the Rwandan Ministry of Health to establish a cardiac surgery program there.

Sabatino is one of the leaders of Team Heart, along with Cardiac Surgery Chief R. Morton "Chip" Bolman, III, MD, his wife Ceeya Patton-Bolman, MSN, RN, Zain Khalpey, MD, Prem Shekar, MD, and Gene Bukhman, MD, who has worked closely with Partners In Health for several years.

"We hope that the model of care we establish can be used throughout sub-Saharan Africa," Patton-Bolman said.

Heart disease in the region is a consequence of a generation of health care neglect. Rwanda, a country with 401 physicians and 4,000 nurses to care for its population of 9.9 million, lacks the

resources to deliver chronic interventions, such as penicillin, and to perform the life-saving operations to help the most critical patients.

Team Heart's first surgery will be on April 6, the anniversary of the beginning of the genocide that occurred in 1994. "Rwandans requested this date because the mission offers hope for the future," Patton-Bolman said.

Over the next few years, Team Heart will work closely with King Faisal Hospital and the Rwandan Ministry of Health not only to establish a cardiac surgery program, but also to help prevent rheumatic heart disease with education and antibiotics.

When children like Louise catch a sore throat, there are no services or antibiotics available to treat it. Without treatment, streptococcal infections can cause the body's immune system to attack its own heart valves in a mistaken attempt at self-defense, leading to rheumatic heart disease.

Thanks to Partners In Health and other organizations, Louise and another child were flown to a hospital in Sudan and received life-saving surgery for free. Team Heart is hopeful that surgeries like this one—which enabled Louise to regain her health—will be available at King Faisal Hospital in the near future for the thousands of others in need.

"We are excited to begin this long-term relationship," Sabatino said. "It will be incredibly rewarding to help Rwanda set up a program that will benefit countless people in the years to come."

Stay tuned to www.brighamandwomens.org/cardiacsurgery/rwanda.aspx for updates on Team Heart, including fundraising events and ways to help this volunteer mission move forward.