



Mission to HAITI

Dr. Martin Arkin brings
the gift of sight to a
devastated island

Hurricane Gustav washed out roads and made it impossible for many Haitians to reach the eye clinic.

By Robert Downes

Even during the best of times, life is rough in Haiti, an island east of Cuba that is considered the poorest country in the western hemisphere. But when ophthalmologist Dr. Martin Arkin, M.D., visited the poverty-stricken island last August, he and his medical team had yet another problem to deal with: that of Hurricane Gustav.

"A lot of patients couldn't get to us because the roads were washed out by the hurricane," he recalls. "Some who made it drove through three feet of water to get to the hospital. It was a fairly mild experience for us, because we were staying at a hospital on top of a mountain. But many people build their homes on the side of the mountain and a lot of their houses were washed away."

"Then there were three more hurricanes after we left Haiti and over 1,000 people died," he adds. "It was pretty horrible after we left."

One of Northern Michigan's top specialists in corneal surgery, Dr. Arkin of Bay Eye Associates in Traverse City has traveled all over the world for years to help people in Third World lands with their eye problems. He's conducted eye clinics in India, Cuba, Honduras and Peru. "I try to go every couple of years. Mostly I do cataract surgery," he says, adding that he also treats a number of non-surgical eye problems.



Dr. Arkin's medical mission team met for the first time at the airport in Haiti.

TEAM APPROACH

In Haiti, he was part of a team which included three optometrists, a nurse and a number of non-medical volunteers, including his companion, Kristin Clara, a fifth grade teacher at Mill Creek Elementary School in Traverse City. "Kristin assisted me in surgery," he says, noting that volunteers tend to get on-the-job training due to the lack of medical and surgical care on Haiti.

Why did he pick Haiti?

"I wanted to go someplace that really needed help, and I also like going somewhere different each time," he says. "I went on the web and found the St. Boniface Foundation, a Catholic charity based in

Massachusetts that's been going to Haiti for years. We met the team at the airport and drove up to their hospital, which was built from donations by members of the church.

"If it weren't for St. Boniface the people in the area we visited would have no care at all," he adds. "They'd never seen an eye doctor and they don't have any eye lasers in the entire country. That's something you really need to have in eye surgery."

Dr. Arkin had to bring his own eye

surgery equipment and microscope to Haiti, which involved shipping it piecemeal. "Doing eye surgery involves a whole lot of equipment and supplies. I shipped it to the foundation in Massachusetts and then they sent a little bit of it with each person visiting Haiti until we had enough for 50 surgeries."

He saw 500 patients during his two-week stay in late August and did 16 surgeries on people who were so far



There is little tourism on poverty-stricken Haiti, so local kids were eager to visit with American visitors.



A child patient gets a rare gift: a visit to a doctor.



Many of the people Dr. Arkin treated for cataracts were legally blind before the surgery.

gone with cataracts that they would be considered legally blind in the U.S. The remainder of his supplies stayed on in Haiti to be used by the next med-surg team.

BACK PAGES

Dr. Arkin, 50, came to Traverse City from the Detroit area in 1994 as the first specialist in corneal surgery in Northern Michigan. He earned his undergrad degree at the University of Michigan; attended Washington University in St. Louis; and studied ophthalmology at Harvard University.

He made his first overseas medical mission to Madurai, India about 15 years ago. "These are great trips," he says. "You get a lot out of them and learn about other peoples' cultures."

Haiti is widely considered to be a dangerous place, owing to its poverty and social disorder. For hundreds of years it was an island of slavery and sugar cane plantations and has never overcome its dismal past.

Dr. Arkin read a U.S. State Department warning for Americans to avoid the country before departing. "But I found that the warning was an over-reaction," he says. "We had no negative experiences and were received very warmly."

In fact, the Haitians were eager to talk about U.S. politics, the presidential race and their relationship with our country.

"The capital city (Port Au Prince) is much less organized than where we stayed," he says. "I wouldn't call it anarchy, but life there is desperate. But we were in a rural area and the people have just enough to get by on. They have their garden and a donkey and little sheds built on the side of the mountains. That's why things were so devastating in the hurricane -- the water washes the sheds off the sides of the mountain and there's no way to get help because the roads are washed away.

"It's kind of amazing to see this level of poverty so close to the United States," he adds. "It's just a two-hour flight from Florida."

But being on a medical mission gets in one's blood, and Dr. Arkin is eager to go again.

"It's a really fun thing for a doctor to do," he says. "It's not comfortable, but it is exciting."

In fact, Dr. Arkin was so encouraged by the trip that he plans to go back to Haiti for another clinic a year from this March. For more on Dr. Arkin and his practice, see www.bayeye.net.