



Health Care Seen From a Small Clinic in Burundi



By George Meyer, MD

I RECENTLY RETURNED from 10 days in Burundi, an East African country previously colonized first by Germany and, after WWI, by Belgium. It lies on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, the second largest lake in the world after Lake Baikal. The Democratic Republic of Congo is on the western coast of the lake and Rwanda borders Burundi to the north. Rwanda and Burundi will forever be linked by the "genocide" of Tutsis by Hutus in 1994. Rwanda is better known because of the Hotel Rwanda book and movie.

I volunteered in a small private clinic (the clinic charged \$1.50 for patients to see me) where my translator (from Kirundi into French - my French leaves a lot to be desired) was a second year medical student at the only medical school in Burundi. She was available because the medical students were on strike (it lasted 5 weeks) because their university, which gets a stipend from the government, did not give the medical students enough money to live on. Last year the faculty struck for 4 weeks over similar issues.



Bike riders hold on to the back of a tanker going up hill.

Their medical school program is a seven year program which takes entering students from high school. The first year of classes consists of classes we would consider pre-med. The next two years are pre-clinical (the anatomy class is all theoretical with drawings, etc.; there are no cadavers).

The fourth year is the beginning of their clerkships. The mornings are spent on the wards rotating on internal medicine, surgery, ob/gyn and pediatrics while the afternoons are spent in didactics in ophthalmology, ENT, orthopedics, etc.

In the fifth year, they are responsible for a larger group of patients with more independence, having a faculty member available for consultation when requested. The sixth year is spent in three hospitals outside the capital where they have even

less supervision. The seventh year is devoted to studying and passing their exams. When successful, the new doctors may go into practice.

Should they want to specialize, they must spend two years in the interior of the country serving as generalists. Most specialties require three years of training.

Public health is a big part of the government's medical focus. A couple of years ago it decided that all child births, even C-sections, would be without cost to the mother. In addition, it is said to have a good, clean water supply as of November 2007.

Falciparum malaria is still a major problem in Burundi, with the peak incidence during the early part of the rainy season in January and February. The female to male ratio of malaria reported from this clinic is about 1:1 until the age of 15, after which there is a male predominance of 2:1 and 3:1 for severe cases - I presume because the men are more exposed.



A pile of green and red wheelbarrows for sale.

Onchocerciasis, a filarial illness known to cause river blindness, is common outside of the capital. There are ongoing efforts to control the disease with the same meds given to our pets to prevent heartworms (one pill gives protection for 6-12 months). Although not a problem from Lake Tanganyika, schistosomiasis is common in the rivers of Burundi.



A fabric shop

Hepatitis B and C are common in Burundi, and there is no ability to treat these diseases. I saw a gentleman with hepatitis C whose GI doc told him he needed to go to India for treatment (\$3,000).

AIDS is a major problem. The country is mostly Christian (predominantly Catholic) with a small, but visible, Muslim community. Homosexuality is not acceptable in Burundi. One young unmarried patient I saw for weight loss complaints was suspicious for AIDS, but we could not discuss it. I asked for a

CBC, but he chose not to even have that performed (AIDS testing is available without cost at government clinics).

Tuberculosis is also a common problem, but I had no chance to pursue further information.

The experience was eye opening. I am looking forward to my next, not yet planned, medical adventure.

geowmeyer1@earthlink.net

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved