

New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

In Nicaragua, N.O. doctors cure the poor

by Richard A. Webster Staff Writer

(Editor's note: Staff reporter Richard A. Webster will be filing updates this week from Leon, Nicaragua, where he is stationed with New Orleans Medical Missions Services, a nonprofit that provides medical services to the world's impoverished people.)

LEON, Nicaragua - More than 150 people sit in the lobby of the Oscar D. Rosales Hospital Escuela in Leon, Nicaragua.

Some walked for days for the opportunity to sit Sunday on one of the wooden benches in the rundown facility and the chance to be treated by the 60-member New Orleans Medical Mission Services team that arrived Saturday for a week's stay.

When the physicians walked into the hospital, the people — most of them poor, their bodies crippled from disease and a lack of medical care — erupted into applause.

The team of doctors from New Orleans doesn't represent hope; to the impoverished people of Nicaragua, they represent no less than the promise of a cure, the solution to their pain and freedom from their disabilities.

The doctors represent the United States and all of its technological advances and unlimited wealth - and with that, the ability to do things the doctors of Nicaragua can only dream of.

So when the New Orleans physicians walked through the packed lobby, they were greeted by an outpouring of joy. Smiles creased the weathered faces of the Nicaraguans. Tears dripped down the face of an elderly woman as she kissed a rosary interlocked between her skeletal fingers.

New Orleans orthopedist Dr. John Montz looked out over the lobby, took a deep breath and said, "OK, let's get started."

'They need it than we do'

The New Orleans Medical Mission Services is a nonprofit that serves the underprivileged people of foreign countries by providing medical treatment, education, equipment and supplies.

In its seven year history NOMMS has made multiple trips to Nicaragua, Ecuador and Panama.

When asked why they concentrate on providing free health care to the people of Latin America as opposed to the people of New Orleans, founder Dr. Daniel Jacob said, "When you see the type of conditions these people live in, the type of poverty they deal with, you realize how much more they need it than we do."

When Montz traveled on a medical mission to El Salvador, he said the state of health care was beyond anything he had ever experienced.

"One of my patients at the hospital was a young man who had his humerus and tibia bones sticking out of his body. I asked what happened to him and they said that he had been hit by a car two and a half months ago. His parents had been trying to save up enough money to get him the care he needed. The poor kid couldn't even move. Who knows how much longer it would have taken them to save up?"

Haves and have-nots

The NOMMS doctors spent their first day in Leon examining and diagnosing prospective patients, judging who was eligible for surgery and those most in need.

The doctors specialize in orthopedics, general surgery, ears, nose and throat, gynecology and plastic surgery. But of the 150 people waiting in the lobby, the majority was there to see orthopedics.

NOMMS brought more than \$250,000 worth of knee replacement prosthetics but that came nowhere close to fulfilling the need.

The Sandanistan government of Nicaragua socialized health care, creating a situation of haves and have-nots, Jacob said. The wealthy pay for treatment at private providers while the middle class and poor are forced to depend on the state-run institutions.

Hospital Escuela is staffed by competent medical professionals who, if they had the equipment and training, could perform the types of surgeries common in the U.S., Jacob said. But the facility is underfunded and crumbling on its own foundation. The doctors are paid \$500 a month, so they must depend on their private practices to make a living. This leaves them with limited time to devote to the hospital's patient population.

Last year Montz performed 19 knee-replacement surgeries in one week. Hospital Escuela didn't perform that many for the entire year.

So it was no surprise that people traveled from hundreds of miles away when they heard that the doctors from New Orleans were returning. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

The elderly patients shuffled into a small clinical room, supported by canes, walkers or the arm of a family member. More than 20 doctors, nurses and medical students jammed into the closet-sized space eager to watch the American specialist in action.

Some patients were too old for the knee-replacement surgery. Others were too young or healthy enough where alternatives were recommended. Some took the news well. Others did not.

When Montz told one elderly lady that she wasn't eligible for surgery, that there were others in greater need, her body trembled as she began to sob. She looked up at Montz and pleaded, placing her hands together as if praying in a cathedral.

Montz, through an interpreter, again tried to explain why she wasn't a good candidate but nothing he said could get through to her. She was inconsolable, having waited all year for the doctors from the United States to perform their miracles.

"Put her on the list," Montz told his assistant.

"You mean the list for next year?" she asked.

"No, the list for surgery this week," he said.

"I guess I'm just a softie," Montz later explained.

At the end of the day Montz diagnosed 56 patients and scheduled 18 for surgery that week. But there were still dozens of people waiting in the lobby. The hard rain outside had pierced the aging structure of the hospital sending streams of water through the ceiling. It ran down the walls and coated floors already damp from the humidity and the absence of centralized air conditioning.

The conditions were miserable, fitting all preconceived notions of Third World health care, but those who had yet to be seen refused to move. They sat patiently on the benches and chairs, even as the

sun set and night loomed. They would wait days, even weeks for the chance to be treated by the Americans.

Unfortunately, given the time constraints of the Mission's one-week visit, Montz wasn't going to be able to see anyone else or schedule additional surgeries.

Doctors from Leon's Hospital Escuela asked Montz to come outside with them to break the bad news. The only way the people in the lobby would believe that they were not going to be seen, that they would have to wait another year to have their knees replaced, was if Montz told them himself.

Through an interpreter, Montz said that the surgical schedule had been filled and though he wanted to help everybody, it was beyond his control.

The lobby fell quiet.

And then a man struggled to stand, his eyes red with anger and despair.

"Why would they tell us to come all this way and sit in this lobby for hours just to tell us to go home?" he demanded. "Many of us waited outside the hospital for days. And yet we do not get to see the doctor?"

A few women quietly cried, holding onto the person next to them, their eyes clenched tight in disbelief. It took them several minutes to absorb the blow. They had come so far, having dreamed of this day, the day when the doctors from the United States would take away their pain and return to them a normal life where they could walk to the grocery store and play with their grandchildren.

But for them, it wasn't meant to be. •