

New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

N.O. doctors fight to save life of Nicaraguan woman

by Richard A. Webster Staff Writer

Editor's Note: Staff Writer Richard A. Webster is filing updates this week from Leon, Nicaragua, where he has accompanied doctors and nurses with New Orleans Medical Mission Services on their trip to provide care to citizens of the impoverished country.

LEON, Nicaragua - Dr. Lisa Bazzett places her hands inside the body of a woman laid out on a metal gurney in an operating room in Hospital Escuela. A metal pan at the foot of the bed holds the woman's cervix and ovaries, which were covered in white, bulbous tumors.

That's where the cancer started, at the ovaries, and then it spread to the bladder, the colon, the diaphragm and close to the stomach.

Bazzett, a surgeon at Ochsner, removes the omentum, what looks like a long slab of red meat. It, too, is riddled with cancer.

It's one of the worst cases Bazzett has seen.

A blue sheet tied to two metal poles separates the patient's body from her head. On one side of the curtain, Bazzett, three nurses and three doctors work inside the open body cavity.

On the other side, the unconscious woman's head rests on a pillow. Her eyes are covered with tape. A nurse strokes her thick black hair.

Her name is Angela. She is 39 years old, lives in Leon and has two children.

Without the surgery, Angela would have no more than two months to live at best, Bazzett said. With the surgery and chemotherapy Angela could extend her life for several years.

Bazzett removed 95 percent of the cancer, but the remaining tumors need to be treated. And therein lies the problem.

In order to receive chemotherapy Angela needs to make regular trips to Managua, at least a 90-minute drive from Leon.

"What are the chances that she is able to get back and forth to Managua for the treatment?" Bazzett asks the Nicaraguan doctors.

They shake their heads. There's little chance. She has limited means and no source of transportation

And for Angela, that's a death sentence.

Without the chemotherapy, Angela's life expectancy drops from several years to as much as 12 months and as little as six.

It's a crushing realization for Bazzett who spent four hours in surgery on one of the worst cancer cases she has seen in hopes of giving Angela a couple of extra years to spend with her children.

"We do what we can when we're here but once we leave it's out of our hands," Bazzett said. "We have

no control over their post-operative treatment and care.”

But if it weren't for the arrival of the New Orleans Medical Mission and the efforts of Bazzett, Angela would have been dead in less than 60 days.

“The doctors here, given their limited resources, wouldn't have even thought about treating a case as far along as this,” Bazzett said. “They would have opened her up, performed a biopsy, closed her up and told her to get chemotherapy.”

It's not that they don't want to save her, Bazzett said. The doctors have to perform triage, directing their time and resources to where they think they can make the biggest difference.

It would have taken the doctors at Hospital Escuela eight hours to do what Bazzett did in four, and in that time they could have cared for five patients who had the potential for better outcomes than Angela.

“They have to pick their battles,” Bazzett said.

After Bazzett finished the last of the day's surgeries she went to see how Angela was doing post-operation. She was told that Angela was in the recovery room. But a recovery room in Nicaragua doesn't mean the same thing that it does in the United States.

Through a glass door Bazzett saw Angela on a stretcher in what appeared to be a storage room surrounded by piles of boxes and unused medical equipment. There was no one monitoring her condition despite the fact that she had just come out of a four-hour surgery. Angela's IV bags were clipped shut, causing her to dehydrate.

Bazzett found a doctor who said he had only meant to leave Angela alone for a few minutes.

“In the U.S., patients in a recovery room are under constant supervision and connected to monitors of every type to ensure they're safety,” Bazzett said. “And the IV's are electronically regulated, so the patient is always hydrated. But here the IV's are controlled manually by little clips, so if someone leaves they close it off and that's that.”

Despite the state of Angela's recovery room, Bazzett received some good news. It turned out the doctors who assisted her in the operation were wrong — Angela doesn't have to travel to Managua for treatment. There is chemotherapy available at Hospital Escuela.

“They had no idea what they were talking about even though they work here,” Bazzett said.

On Wednesday, Bazzett followed up with Angela who had been moved into a room with other patients that looked less like a place where mops would be stored.

Angela's mother stood at the foot of her bed watching over her daughter. Bazzett took her into the hallway to explain the situation and discovered that the mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 42 along with her sister.

This indicated that the family had a hereditary syndrome that causes cancer to appear early in life. If two sisters contracted breast cancer at the age of 42 in the U.S. chances are the daughter, Angela, would have been tested and had her ovaries removed, eliminating the risk, Bazzett said.

And if that happened, her life expectancy at 39 years old wouldn't be limited to a couple years at best.

But it's pointless to compare Nicaragua's health care with what is available in the U.S., Bazzett said. The reality is that doctors in Nicaragua don't have the best equipment or the necessary manpower and funding to meet the needs of the sick. And as a result thousands of poor people die needlessly every year.

If this weren't the reality, Bazzett and the New Orleans Medical Mission would have no need to spend a week in Leon trying to save someone like Angela.

And sometimes, despite their best efforts, it's too late to make a difference. •