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Plastic Surgery: Medical missions are time well-spent

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Plastic Surgery

I returned about a week ago from a 10-day trip to Cuernavaca, Mexico, with Smile Network, an organization that focuses on the repair of cleft lips and palates in underserved areas of the world. It was one of those "out of the comfort zone" experiences for someone like me, being mildly skeptical of medical "missions."

I wonder sometimes if these foreign operations aren't a subtle manifestation of American altruistic imperialism, a belief that we need to save the world, or that foreign governments don't fund their own cleft lip and palate programs because they know we will pick up the slack. When I explained these concerns to a veteran of 13 of these missions, Dr. Walt Peet, he listened patiently and said, "Maybe that's true, but the kids don't know the politics, and we do it only for the kids. Focus on the kids."

It's not hard to get to Cuernavaca, a mountainous, gorgeous place with a year-round temperature of 75-80 degrees. That is, once you get through airport security. I must be on some list, because I am always getting screened. There is a short list of people in my life that I want running their hands all over my body, and a very short list of men I want doing that. And those rubber gloves conjure some unpleasant associations. ... This airport procedure seems much to me like checking women for prostate cancer. Anyway.

Friday and Saturday were screening days, where Walt and I saw 70 or so kids with all manner of cleft lips, cleft palates and deformed noses or bad scars from previous repairs. Our hosts, the University of Mexico at Cuernavaca, supplied translators (most all of the high school students there speak English).

These missions are very tightly organized, and whether it is screening kids or operating, you are expected to move quickly and efficiently. Each child is assigned a priority score, and Sunday we designed an operating schedule for the week.

Monday through Friday we did 50 operations in two operating rooms. It was an exhilarating experience. Cleft surgery is some of the most demanding, technical and artistic surgery there is, and basically an opportunity like this is a surgeon's candy store.

There were certainly long, physical, surgery days, but in the evening we would go upstairs to the wards to see the post-op kids, and the reactions of the kids and their parents would totally fire us up for the next day. Some of the older kids with bad deformities of their lips and noses would look in the mirror at their new faces, as if seeing themselves for the first time, seeing themselves as they should be - "yeah, that's finally me."

It's always fascinated me how the arrangement of some skin and soft tissue can so drastically alter how one human perceives another. Correction of a facial deformity is life-altering, and the privilege of doing so many kids in a week humbled even a cynic such as myself.

We had a great team of mostly Minnesota-based anesthesiologists, nurses, medical records people, the Smile Network coordinators and the Mexican University staff. Everyone came to work hard, with the expectation that the care delivered would be every bit as good as that in Minneapolis or the Mayo Clinic.

I think I would like to do it again. It was a long time to be gone, 10 days, with a young family, although my kids suggested Siberia as the next destination.

There are some cultural issues as well; for instance, I place a high cultural value on toilet seats, which apparently is not a priority in Mexican hospital bathrooms - bring your own paper. And the mud huts we slept in, well, OK, they weren't huts, it was actually a motel; OK, it was more like a resort - so it WAS a resort with two swimming pools, but nowhere in the Bible does it say you can't be comfortable doing the Lord's work.

Friday afternoon, as we were packing up the OR, the Mexican nurses, who had donated their week to assist us, put up a sign saying "God will bless you for what you have done." I think that is true, but not because we did surgery (for surgeons do that as ducks swim upon the water) but because we understand a little better that service to others may be the only really meaningful thing we do in our lives.

In the bewildering intellectual miasma that is human experience, the touch of one hand on another may be all the understanding we need.

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