

# Recycling Resources/ Restoring Hope

Madison-area non-profit puts U.S. medical surplus to work in the Third World

by Lisa Fernandez, RN, BSN

Many of the amenities and practices we take for granted in our delivery of health care in the United States are sorely lacking in developing countries. In Matagalpa, Nicaragua, for example, a hospitalized patient is dependent on family to provide food, bed linens, basic care, and the administration of oral medications. These medications must be purchased dose by dose with cash by family or friends – the hospital (including the ER) does not provide medications to the patient. One’s life – or death – may depend on the ability of loved ones to buy needed medication.

In many parts of the world, access to adequate health and medical services is severely limited. Not only is there a shortage of trained health care personnel, but essential supplies and equipment are in short supply. As a result, national health measures in most countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean are alarmingly low. Infant mortality rates are much higher than those in industrialized countries, life expectancy is lower, and death and morbidity from accidents and disease are dismayingly high. The health consequences of war only exacerbate the health crises in many countries in the developing world.

In contrast with developing world health care systems, the U.S. has a relative surfeit of resources. To remain competitive, each hospital and clinic seeks to acquire the latest in medical technology, resulting in a constant turnover of medical supplies and equipment. Equipment such as wheelchairs, walkers, and prosthetic devices are often discarded after minimal use. As vendors change inventories, huge stocks of medical supplies frequently become surplus. Unless otherwise allocated,



these perfectly usable resources are destined for landfills, thus exacerbating the country’s waste management problems.

Upon considering the tremendous need in developing countries, and the supply of excess medical supplies and equipment in the U.S., the founders of Sharing Resources Worldwide (SRW), Mary Dowling and Lisa Fernandez – two Madison area nurses – saw an opportu-

nity to make a difference. Why not, they reasoned, establish a system to collect excess medical resources and send them overseas to help people in need? Why not, indeed! A simple strategy, but one that has proven extremely effective. In just five years, Sharing Resources Worldwide has collected hundreds of tons of medical supplies and equipment, sorted and packed these items, and shipped them to scores of countries overseas. Sharing Resources

Worldwide provides the resources required to address critical health needs of the disabled and disadvantaged in some of the world’s poorest countries.

Established in January 2002, Sharing Resources Worldwide is incorporated and has tax-exempt status as a 501c 3 organization. SRW’s mission is to improve the health and quality of life of families in need around the world, thereby empowering them to live with increased dignity, independence and hope.

SRW is entirely volunteer driven. The founders – both registered nurses – handle all administrative responsibilities. A corps of dedicated supporters undertakes the collection, sorting, and packing of medical supplies and equipment. A seven-member Advisory Board, including health care professionals and prominent community leaders, provides guidance and direction. SRW rents a warehouse on Madison’s east side to store donated materials prior to shipping.

Sharing Resources Worldwide carries out its mission through three program components.

## MEDICAL SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT

SRW continually receives either surplus or “gently” used medical supplies and equipment from Wisconsin hospitals, medical supply companies, clinics, and individuals. Upon receipt, the resources are sorted and stored in SRW’s Madison warehouse. To prepare for shipment, materials are packed in appropriate containers, and loaded onto large semi-trailers.

Shipments are sent directly to partner



organizations overseas, all of which have been certified as reliable, usually through field visits by SRW's leadership. SRW staff maintains contact and receives feedback from our overseas partners to ensure that the donated resources reach those in need. SRW leaders frequently travel to the sites receiving shipments. Shipments are also sent by U.S. and international humanitarian organizations that are engaged in health care programs overseas for subsequent distribution through their networks.

Over the past five years, SRW has provided hundreds of tons of medical supplies and equipment to its overseas partners, in countries such as Haiti, Peru, Sierra Leone, Russia, Ghana, Afghanistan, Kenya, Nigeria, Philippines, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras and Nicaragua. In 2005 alone, 22 shipments left our loading docks, totaling 378 tons. To date in 2006, 15 shipments totaling 216 tons have been sent. In addition, SRW volunteers traveling to developing countries generally carry medicines and supplies in their baggage. In 2006, supplies have been provided in this fashion to Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guinea, and Vietnam, as well as to hurricane ravaged Louisiana and Mississippi.

### WISCONSIN/NICARAGUA WHEELCHAIR PROJECT

The Wisconsin/Nicaragua Wheelchair Project works in ongoing partnership with Familias Especiales of Matagalpa, Nicaragua. Familias Especiales is a non-profit or-

ganization that serves handicapped children and their families with a wide variety of services. SRW has enabled them to establish a fully independent wheelchair workshop which is meeting the mobility needs of an increasing proportion of handicapped children and

adults in Matagalpa and the surrounding barrios.

Accomplishments to date include:

- Over 1000 wheelchairs distributed to disabled individuals at no cost to recipients.
- Establishment of a fully equipped and staffed wheelchair workshop with all necessary equipment, tools, and spare parts to adjust, repair, and appropriately fit wheelchairs.
- Training and paid employment of seven Nicaraguans, some of them handicapped themselves, to staff and operate the workshop.

### MEDICAL MISSIONS

Sharing Resources Worldwide organizes teams of up to 14 professionals, including surgeons, nurses, technicians, and other medical personnel to travel to areas of need to provide medical services at no cost. Orthopedic surgeries are performed for those with various forms of physical disability, while those with serious vision problems undergo surgery by experienced ophthalmologists. In addition, patients receive treatment for a variety of illnesses, along with essential medications. Three to four missions are organized each year, each lasting about seven days. Participating team members pay for their own airfare and accommo-

lations. Team members also bring hard-to-find medicines to distribute in-country.

Surgeries are performed on children and adolescents under 18. Training is a major component of the missions, strengthening skills of local health care workers to ensure adequate follow-up with patients. In 2006, the value of the services provided and supplies and equipment donated relating to those services totaled \$885,350.

The total value of SRW shipments and missions worldwide in 2006 was \$1,475,850.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP SRW?

- Indicate whether your practice site can assist by donation of selected prescription medications to be taken abroad by SRW medical mission teams. Our greatest need is for antibiotics and asthma medications, including albuterol for nebulization. Note: We can not accept expired medications.
- Collect usable materials at the hospital or clinic where you work.
- Contact medical supply companies,

company representatives and hospitals in your area to solicit donations of supplies and equipment.

- Assist with fundraising.
- Make a monetary donation.
- Spread the word about SRW - Network, network, network.
- Invite SRW to give a presentation to your group.
- Volunteer some time in our warehouse to sort supplies or load a container.



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