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Porter Physicians Make First-Ever Humanitarian Trip to India

VALPARAISO -- For two weeks in February, Porter physicians Vikram D. Appannagari, M.D., and Nicholas Retson, M.D., along with seven local nurses took their humanitarian efforts to the northern reaches of India, performing nearly 40 surgeries over five days.

In doing so, the group became the first international surgical team ever to make the trip to the city of Lucknow in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

Under the banner of Healing, Health and Hope, Retson, a plastic surgeon, and Appannagari, an anesthesiologist, were able to perform cleft lip and palate surgery on children and adults too poor to afford the surgery.

“Over the past year, we were able to get in contact and become certified as a medical team by The Smile Train, a group that has as its mission the repair of cleft lips and palates around the globe,” Retson said. “It took nearly that long to get arrangements made for the trip. What we found when we arrived there was poverty that was even worse than that which we have seen on our Central American trips.”

The trip to Lucknow was Appannagari’s seventh humanitarian trip and Retson’s 27th. In addition to the surgeries, both Retson and Appannagari gave lectures in both plastics and anesthesiology at the local medical school.

“This trip went extremely well. Until now, we have focused our energies on helping those in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras. This turned out to be a great trip and all of our patients did extremely well,” Appannagari said. “We were surprised to see there were so many adults who were walking around with unrepaired cleft lips and

palates. The surgeries gave the adults who had them a big boost in terms of both simple appearance and self-confidence. For the children, the impact is even more profound. Repairing the cleft lips and palates helps make them able to speak. The earlier the surgery is performed, the greater likelihood the child will be able to have a normal life.”

Appannagari said this trip showed both he and Retson that traveling farther distances to perform humanitarian work is a challenge, but doable.

“Trips like this require a greater commitment – both in the cost in dollars and in time. We all agreed it was well worth the effort because we were able to help the local people so much,” Appannagari said. “Typically, our Central American trips include a commitment for nine days. In this case, the trip was 14 days and the price of the airplane tickets and hotel was much greater than it is in Central America.”

The cost of supplies and some nursing expenses were offset – in part – by contributions from The Smile Train and both Porter and the health system’s medical staff, Retson said. “The real heroes are the nurses who give up their vacations to work 14-hour days in primitive conditions to help others. Porter and the medical staff made substantial donations to help pay for supplies and to help defray the cost for the nurses.”

“We were very grateful for the assistance from Porter,” Appannagari and Retson said. “This was the first time we have asked for assistance and they were more than happy to help.”

Retson said the need in that part of the country is so great that both he and Appannagari are already planning a follow-up trip to Lucknow.

“We visited a small village and when the people heard an American medical team was coming, there were 250 people who came seeking help – 173 of those had cleft lip and palate,” he said.

For Appannagari, the trip to his homeland held special meaning.

“Nick (Retson) dedicated this trip to my father, who always believed in helping others,” he said. “I greatly admired my father and am sure he would be proud of what I’m doing.”