



Local physical therapist returns for another tour in Haiti

Rehab specialists needed for many years to come

By Liz Clark
For The Scribe

When **Katherine McCoy, PT, MTC**, was a first responder to Haiti in January, she and the rest of the **Medical Teams International (MTI)** crew knew it was only the beginning of a long, long period of recovery.

"They need help now as much as they did when we arrived in January," said McCoy, who just returned from a second volunteer stint in Les Cayes, a community just south of Port Au Prince where many of those displaced from the city are congregated.

While physicians are always needed, McCoy turned out to be an invaluable asset to the team in Les Cayes. Her background as a burn therapist (she ran the Burn Department at Vanderbilt's Teaching Hospital), combined with her orthopedic manual physical therapy training, made her a natural member of the triage personnel. She was able to clean wounds, provide sharp debridement, fracture assessment and setting, as well as perform surgical prep.

"It was worse than anything seen in any previous catastrophe according to other MTI/UN staff. Civil-war-style medicine was happening – amputations were being performed with just alcohol for anesthetic at the UN," said McCoy. Infection was the biggest issue. People who in the United States would have been immediately admitted to a hospital and started on antibiotics and morphine were instead lying in the sun and dirt where their wounds became cesspools, she said.

McCoy and the MTI team saw hundreds of patients a day. They were lined up on sidewalks, in the parking lot, transported on garden gates, brought in on the backs of family members, on recliners found in the streets and by the truckloads from the UN. While that's a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of thousands of people who were injured in the January earthquake, she emphasizes that helping just one person can mean life for an entire family.

Crush injuries sustained by falling buildings or burn injuries from fires were most common. But even something as innocu-



Physical therapist Katherine McCoy checks a patient in a Les Cayes clinic in Haiti on a recent return visit to the devastated country on behalf of Medical Teams International.

ous as a thorn in a foot could be disastrous. "In the U.S., you could go to an ER to have it removed and be on your way with an antibiotic. In a third world country, it becomes infected and eventually the foot has to be amputated if sepsis ensues. The net result of injuries easily treated stateside is that now the main breadwinner for a family is unable to work and an entire family is facing death because there is no safety net, no welfare or social programs," explained McCoy. "It's a pretty dire existence."

After the initial months of

wound care, fracture setting and amputations, Haitians had nowhere to go for follow-up. So MTI partnered with a hospital and a sewing vocational school in Les Cayes to create a 20 to 30-bed non-acute rehabilitation center for amputees awaiting prosthetics or rehabilitation. "Our orthopedic team promised the patients at the Port au Prince hospital that MTI was willing to transport them back to the clinic in Les Cayes for follow-up prosthesis, rehabilitation and/or revision," said McCoy.

"Medically, they need help not just now, but in six months, and

two years, and ten years," said McCoy. "When I returned in August, I saw people who still had external fixators that should have come off in February and March, people whose scar tissue is preventing movement because they were afraid to weight bear on healing injuries.

"We saw people who had knee flexion contractures as a result of not mobilizing their below-knee amputation stumps that were so severe they need surgical revision. Now they need an above the knee amputation, which requires infinitely more effort as an amputee to operate a prosthesis than a BK."

MTI has teams going to Les Cayes continually, and there is a particularly urgent need right now for physical therapists, certified prosthetists-orthotists (CPO's), and orthopedists to provide follow-up care to those who had amputations or whose scar tissue has inhibited movement, said McCoy.

"I think physicians, nurses, and physical therapists can be profoundly impacted by the experience of donating their time to nongovernmental organizations," emphasized McCoy. "I have received far more than I've given each time I've volunteered." She

is particularly impressed with the teams that volunteer for Medical Teams International, an NGO whose margin of overhead is just three percent. "You don't have to go to Haiti; you can donate money, you can help in their warehouse, you can volunteer at U.S. disaster areas."

"Our country has had – I presume primarily unintended – a devastating impact on certain countries, and I believe as Americans we have a profound obligation to reach out to those who have been marginalized, especially when a natural disaster worsens their plight," said McCoy. She brings that conviction home – when she returned to Haiti she took her two children with her to work as physical therapy aides.

"They have helped me as aides at our clinic and on other teams," said McCoy with a smile. "In fact, I do much the same type of work here that I did in Haiti, less the first-responder trauma – people present with many of the same types of injuries pre and post-operatively – only here it's called Sports Medicine."

McCoy is founder and co-owner of **West Portland Physical Therapy Clinic, LLC**, which specializes in orthopedic manual therapy and sports medicine.



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