Volunteering...an opportunity to give back

Vietnam project offers challenges and new perspectives

Rewarding experiences, friendship, challenges, and philanthropy are words AOFAS members used to describe their participation in this year’s successful Overseas Outreach Project to Vietnam. The project has become an annual, ongoing expedition for AOFAS volunteers, offering an opportunity to use their skills to do something truly special for others.

Over the seven years of this important initiative, surgery has been performed without charge on more than 450 children and adults with deformities and disabilities. The AOFAS project is funded by corporate and member donations to the Society’s Outreach & Education Fund (OEF).

Through cooperative efforts with the Seattle-based Prosthetics Outreach Foundation (POF), the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, and the Vietnamese Ministry of Health, this outreach mission has continued to evolve and attract member volunteers, who volunteer two weeks of time and pay for their own travel to Vietnam.

The well-used phrase, “out of your comfort zone,” is very applicable to the surgeon’s experience in Vietnam. As others who have done volunteer work in developing countries and in the Society’s earlier Vietnam projects will attest, “MD” stands for “make do.” Well-equipped operating rooms and standards applicable in the U.S. are not found in the outlying provinces of Vietnam. The AOFAS members stepped away from their own worlds to offer their time and skills for people who otherwise would never have received much-needed care and corrective surgery.

First-time participants in this year’s project were Dale Blasier, MD (Little Rock, AR); Paul Hecht, MD (Lebanon, NH); Francis McGuigan, MD (Washington DC); Keith Wapner, MD (Philadelphia, PA); and seasoned participants Naomi Shields, MD (Wichita, KS) and AOFAS Executive Director Zan Lofgren. AOFAS volunteers worked side by side in the operating rooms with Vietnamese surgeons in orthopaedic rehabilitation facilities located in the coastal city of Vinh, south of Hanoi, Ba Vi, west of Hanoi, Hai Phong, Vietnam’s third largest city, and Thai Nguyen, a village north of Hanoi. Families, many from outlying villages, greeted the surgeons warmly and waited patiently hoping that their children would be selected for surgery.

Dr. Blasier, who participated in Team 1 during the project’s first two weeks, explained: “Many of these folks had experienced crippling limb deformities for years. It made us feel good to help those that we could. The Vietnamese health care system is certainly not as advanced as our own, but it is not due to lack of hard work. The Vietnamese are incredibly innovative and industrious, but they do not have the funding, technology, equipment and continuing medical education that we tend to take for granted.”

Dr. Blasier went on, “The trip was most memorable for the opportunity to connect with individual Vietnamese on a personal basis. I found them warm, welcoming and friendly. Like each of us, they look forward to a good meal, cold beer, camaraderie, and a fine education for their children.”

Dr. Wapner, who went to Vinh City, Hai Phong and Hanoi with Dr. Blasier, said: “Most rewarding for me was the interaction with the Vietnamese physicians and the patients. We were welcomed with warmth, respect and friendship. This was truly a learning experience and left me with a great sense of fulfillment. 

AOFAS wins national recognition for Vietnam project

The AOFAS Overseas Outreach Project to Vietnam has been named an overall winner in the “Associations Make a Better World Awards” program of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE). The award recognizes outstanding association programs, projects and activities that make a significant contribution to societies and economies around the world. Zan Lofgren, CAE, AOFAS Executive Director, accepted the award for AOFAS during the ASAE meeting in San Diego in August. Last year the Vietnam project was named to ASAE’s honor roll in the “Associations Advance America” awards program.
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“It was enlightening to see how resourceful the Vietnamese orthopaedic surgeons were in being able to accomplish what they do with limited resources. Many of the patients that we saw had polio, a disease we only read about in the U.S. Applying our surgical techniques to these deformities provided for an exchange of ideas between us and our physician hosts. Although the working conditions presented many challenges, it provided a perspective on how fortunate we are to have the resources that we do in our country.”

This year several companies donated equipment to give the surgeons resources that earlier teams have not had. To raise awareness for the importance of corporate contributions, this year OEF Platinum Level corporate donors were invited to observe the project first-hand. John Treace, Vice President Marketing Biologics and Extremities for Wright Medical Technology, Inc., accompanied by OEF President Thomas Lee, MD, spent a week in several locations with the teams.

The AOAFAS surgeons also participated in the 6th Scientific Seminar on Lower Limb Surgery on May 24 in Hanoi. This educational program, co-sponsored by the AOAFAS, POF, and Viet Duc Hospital, included presentations by Vietnamese surgeons and AOAFAS members from both teams, using simultaneous translation.

Team 2 consisted of Drs. Hecht, McGuigan, and Shields, who worked in BaVí, Thai Nguyen, and Hanoi. Dr. Hecht spoke of his feeling after this trip, “This was not a pleasure trip; it was educational, challenging, and philanthropic. Experiencing another medical system and culture was a unique opportunity. Offering care to those who would not otherwise have been receiving care was a privilege.

“I've no question that I received more than I gave during these two weeks. Our reception from the Vietnamese patients and physicians could not have been warmer or more appreciative. The trip was about the people; those we traveled with, those we worked with, and those we cared for.”

Applications for the 2009 Vietnam project are being accepted until December 1, 2008. The application form can be downloaded from the AOAFAS Web site at www.aofas.org by clicking on Medical Professionals. For further information, contact the AOAFAS Executive Office at aofasinfo@aofas.org or by phone: 800-235-4855 or 847-698-4654 (outside the U.S.).

Dr. McGuigan, also a first time participant, reflected on his experience. “This was the most rewarding professional experience I have had since retiring from the Navy. During my last years in the service I cared for Marines gravely injured in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Treating those brave young men was the highlight of my naval career. Treating the Vietnamese people, the victims of another unfortunate war, made another great impression on me.

“Our efforts on these trips allow a very few people half a globe away to lead a better life. The missions are as great a benefit, if not greater, to the surgeons involved. For two weeks we glimpse life in the third world and then go home, hopefully, with a better perspective on what is important in life and how blessed we are. Simply put, I met great colleagues, made new friends; fell in love with Vietnam and left knowing ‘one other life has breathed easier’.”

Dr. Shields, who has been involved with the project since its inception, summed up the feelings of the many members who have volunteered in the seven years of the surgical outreach projects to Vietnam:

“Returning to Vietnam remains as exciting and challenging for me as the first time I went. Patient need does not change. The surgeons there remain eager to learn and try to provide the best possible care within their means. Education and building a foundation for future learning is probably the most important part of our mission. Developing friends and having the opportunity to see a beautiful country are great additional benefits. I challenge AOAFAS members to expand their horizons and volunteer.”

Scranton receives Humanitarian Award from alma mater

Pierce Scranton, MD, was honored with Kenyon College’s Humanitarian Award in recognition of his years of surgical volunteer services in Vietnam. The award was presented May 30, 2008 during alumni weekend at the Gambier, Ohio campus. Dr. Scranton, an AOAFAS past president and the first OEF Board chair, started the Society’s Overseas Outreach Project that now annually sends AOAFAS members to Vietnam to share knowledge and treat patients alongside Vietnamese orthopaedic surgeons.

“What we’ve all done in Vietnam happened through the support of the AOAFAS Board,” says Dr. Scranton. “I was lucky enough to have a vision, and then even luckier to have a supportive Board that helped make it happen.”