Volunteering in Vietnam: Challenges and new perspectives

Feedback on the AOFAS Overseas Outreach Project

“I’m not exactly sure what motivated me to commit to a humanitarian mission in Vietnam. Perhaps it was the positive experience of other AOFAS members who have gone on earlier projects that influenced my decision. I know it was the right decision for me,” reflected Paul Juliano, MD (Hershey, Pennsylvania), on his return from the 2012 AOFAS Overseas Outreach Project to Vietnam. “I worked outside my comfort zone, and my first e-mail home was OMG! However, this experience has made me a better surgeon and hopefully, a better person. The gratitude of the Vietnamese people for the care, the eagerness of the orthopaedic surgeons to learn, and the new perspectives I have gained made this a very valuable experience.”

“The experience was everything I expected and so much more,” said Jorge Acevedo, MD (West Palm Beach, Florida). “The Vietnamese doctors and residents were appreciative, helpful, and very creative despite their means. Many times I felt the people looked at us as the foreign miracle doctors who were going to fix the impossible and restore their lives back to normal. What they didn’t realize was the life-changing impact they were making on us! Although I always try to appreciate what we have, this experience really put things in perspective.”

This year’s other AOFAS volunteers – Drs. Aaron Guyer (Tallahassee, Florida), Naren Gurbani (Downey, California), and Naomi Shields (Wichita, Kansas) – expressed similar feelings about the time they spent in Vietnam.

“As a fourth-year medical student I spent time working in Kenya and this really opened my eyes to the medical needs of people in developing nations,” stated Dr. Guyer. “It encouraged me to pursue medical outreach and service in third-world countries. The AOFAS project was an opportunity to make a difference in the quality of life for those who do not have access to much-needed medical care.”

Despite the project’s hectic pace and the hot July weather, AOFAS members worked tirelessly in evaluating patients, sharing knowledge, and teaching new techniques.

“I love to teach surgery and, as the teacher, I also learn,” said Dr. Juliano. “I really enjoyed working with the Vietnamese surgeons and nurses, who were eager to learn. While I felt really good that I was able to teach many of our Vietnamese colleagues surgical and clinical evaluation techniques in treating complex foot and ankle problems, this experience also allowed me to grow as a surgeon,” reflected Dr. Guyer. “Having to think ‘outside the box’ on how to accomplish a specific surgical goal with the limited resources available was a daily occurrence. This forced me to think back about basic orthopedic principles and rely less on the many modern implants, instruments, and imaging modalities we have available in the United States for diagnosing and treating orthopedic foot and ankle problems.”

Patients, patients, and more patients

Dr. Shields, an 11-year veteran of Vietnam projects, and Dr. Juliano arrived at the Orthopaedic Rehabilitation Institute in Hanoi to smiling patients waving from the windows. The first order of business was tea with the Institute director, and then on to the clinic.

“Working together with the local orthopaedic surgeons, we started evaluating the complex pathology walking in – or in some cases, being carried in,” said Dr. Shields. “Next it was off to the OR with the local surgeons to operate on the selected patients.”

“The Vietnamese orthopaedic surgeons did a marvelous job of pre-selecting a variety of foot and ankle deformity cases,” said Dr. Gurbani, whose volunteer time was in Thai Nguyen, Dien Bien Phu and the Viet Duc Hospital in Hanoi. “In Dien Bien Phu, as I was finishing the pre-op evaluation of a young lady with severe bilateral Equino Cavo Varus deformity of the feet, I asked her, ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’ She answered affirmatively and immediately her younger sister and male cousin were brought into the exam room. Now suddenly we were looking at three pairs of feet with severe Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disease for surgical correction. Similar stories were repeated throughout my stay in Vietnam.”

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Expanding education at the local hospitals
As education is important for improving patient care, this year’s AOFAS Vietnam volunteers expanded the scope of the project by conducting small group educational sessions at the hospitals where they worked. The seminars provided the local orthopaedic surgeons with a focused educational opportunity on specific clinical issues. Some sessions included surgeons from other area hospitals and each of the six seminars had 13-20 attendees, an ideal size for interactive discussion.

Conference in Hanoi
Besides the one-on-one teaching in the clinics and ORs and the seminars at the local hospitals, the most visible educational event was the one-day conference held in Hanoi on July 21. Co-sponsored by the AOFAS, the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation (POF), and Viet Duc Hospital – the large teaching facility in Hanoi – the “Surgery of the Lower Extremities” conference brought together 135 Vietnamese orthopaedic surgeons from the northern provinces of Vietnam. AOFAS members and four Vietnamese surgeons presented all with simultaneous translation, and the conference was reported by the local TV news station.

Recognition of AOFAS
The AOFAS also received media attention in other locations. In Vinh City a crowd of patients, doctors, nurses, government officials, and the media greeted Drs. Juliano and Shields as they arrived at the medical facility. The AOFAS was recognized by the chairman of the People’s Committee of the Nghệ An Province for the Society’s ongoing commitment to humanitarian service for the disabled children and adults of Vietnam and to help improve patient care.

In Dien Bien Phu, a sleepy town surrounded by mountains in the far north near the Laotian border, a local TV station filmed in the OR and reported on the work of the AOFAS volunteers and the further education for the local doctors.

“The power of television became evident the next day when a large number of “mountain people” showed up at the hospital, some traveling for two days by foot!” recalled Dr. Gurbani. “We examined them in mini-clinics between planned surgeries and even squeezed in an additional surgery for residual club foot release.”

“It was humbling that these patients and their families walked from their small mountain villages, sleeping on the road along the way, just to be seen by the American surgeons who may be able to help them or their children’s orthopedic problems,” said Dr. Guyer.

About our partner organization – POF
This recap would not be complete without a good word about the Society’s partner, Seattle-based Prosthetics Outreach Foundation (POF) and its Hanoi staff, who handle in-country logistics and organizational relationships in Vietnam for the AOFAS project. With its complimentary mission of “helping the developing world walk,” the POF has set up production and training to provide prosthetic devices for the indigent without charge. Through its expanding Ponseti program, the POF educates the public about club foot treatment through pamphlets, radio and TV and its staff fan out to smaller cities and towns in Vietnam to educate and train technicians in the Ponseti method of applying casts.

“The results of the Ponseti program organized by the POF were impressive,” said Dr. Gurbani. “We saw a number of small children who had been successfully treated with Ponseti casting and did not need surgery or only needed a TAL.”

Reflections
“I have volunteered my services in many countries in the past 15 years, and this visit to Vietnam was the best so far,” reflected Dr. Gurbani. “The AOFAS has been organizing and sending teams of members to Vietnam for 11 years, and I feel I was the beneficiary of their efficiency and professionalism.”

Your help is needed
AOFAS volunteers pay their own travel costs to Vietnam. In-country costs are covered by the Outreach & Education Fund (OEF) through charitable donations from members and industry. To help support the OEF or to volunteer to participate in a future AOFAS Overseas Outreach Project to Vietnam visit www.aofas.org (About OEF). The next application deadline is December 1, 2012.