

Committed To Global Health

One Doctor's Humanitarian Visit to Haiti



ABOVE: Three of Haiti's cherished paramedics take a break with Dr. Doohan. RIGHT: Family physicians take care of patients of all ages, in and out of the hospital, making them ideal for global health deployments.



"Act locally, think globally" is more than a bumper sticker slogan to Noemi "Mimi" Doohan, MD, PhD. This dedicated family physician spent the first week of October 2011 in Port au Prince, Haiti as part of a volunteer team deployed by University of Miami-based Project MediShare to work alongside local doctors and nurses at Bernard Mevs Hospital, the earthquake-ravaged island nation's only critical care hospital.

"The Haitian infrastructure is still pretty damaged; a large number of Haiti's doctors were killed in the earthquake," she relates. "Our mission was to not only care for critically ill patients but also to help train Haitian medical professionals."

Dr. Doohan and her volunteer team — made up of nurses, respiratory and physical therapists, critical care specialists, emergency department physicians and hospitalists — worked closely with medical staff at the Bernard Mevs Hospital, including three young Haitian paramedics.

"There are only about a dozen paramedics in the entire country, which doesn't even have an emergency medical services (EMS) system," she says. "These three young men were at our sides continuously, working 14-hour days. They acted as medical assistants and translators, and we taught them medicine. They are so devoted to improving the health care in their country, and really epitomize the spirit of the Haitian people."

"Our team cared for 60 seriously ill adult patients while we were there," she continues. "Of these, 20 died. Among the 60 patients, a third were trauma patients — half of them victims of violent crime — another third had neurologic conditions like stroke and seizures, and another third suffered from infections and chronic disease."

"The hospital is next to one of the most violent slums in the world," Dr. Doohan notes. "We weren't allowed to leave the compound without an escort because there are kidnappings and worse. But it was still tremendously rewarding. I worked as hard as I physically could, but at the end of the day I felt joy to be part of something very meaningful, to contribute to rebuilding Haiti."

This humanitarian focus has defined Dr. Doohan's career. She is the founder of Doctors without Walls-Santa Barbara Street Medicine, a collaboration of volunteer professionals who deliver free health care and related services directly to people living and sleeping on the streets, and during times of disaster. She was also co-founder of the Public Service Medical Scholars at Stanford School of Medicine, a program to nurture young physician leaders in public service. Dr. Doohan is a Family Physician with the Eisenhower Primary Care 365 program at the Argyros Health Center in La Quinta and she helped to establish the new Eisenhower Wellness Institute.

"I really believe in the motto of 'act locally, think globally,'" she says. "If you train and work locally with the most vulnerable in your own community, you're better prepared for international work, to be an effective volunteer in an austere environment."

When asked how to support global health locally in the Coachella Valley, Dr Doohan responds, "We have a great local nonprofit organization called Volunteers in Medicine that operates a free clinic in Coachella where clinicians can volunteer. Also, designated donations to the Eisenhower Medical Center Foundation will support the Internal and Family Medicine Residency Programs at Eisenhower and their global health electives".

"We're creating a residency program in Family Medicine at Eisenhower with global health electives," she explains. "I'm part of the core faculty of this program, and really excited about teaching our future residents about local opportunities for global health, and maybe taking them to Haiti with me in the future. Because I intend to go back every year."