

Medical volunteers

Fox Valley doctors hook up with international nonprofit groups for goodwill medical missions



DR. TODD VAN YE performed reconstructive surgery on Mwarini Kwabo, 8, enabling the African girl to open her mouth for the first time. The girl was born with a sheet of bone that fused her jaw hinges together.

By Shawn Rhea
Post-Crescent staff writer

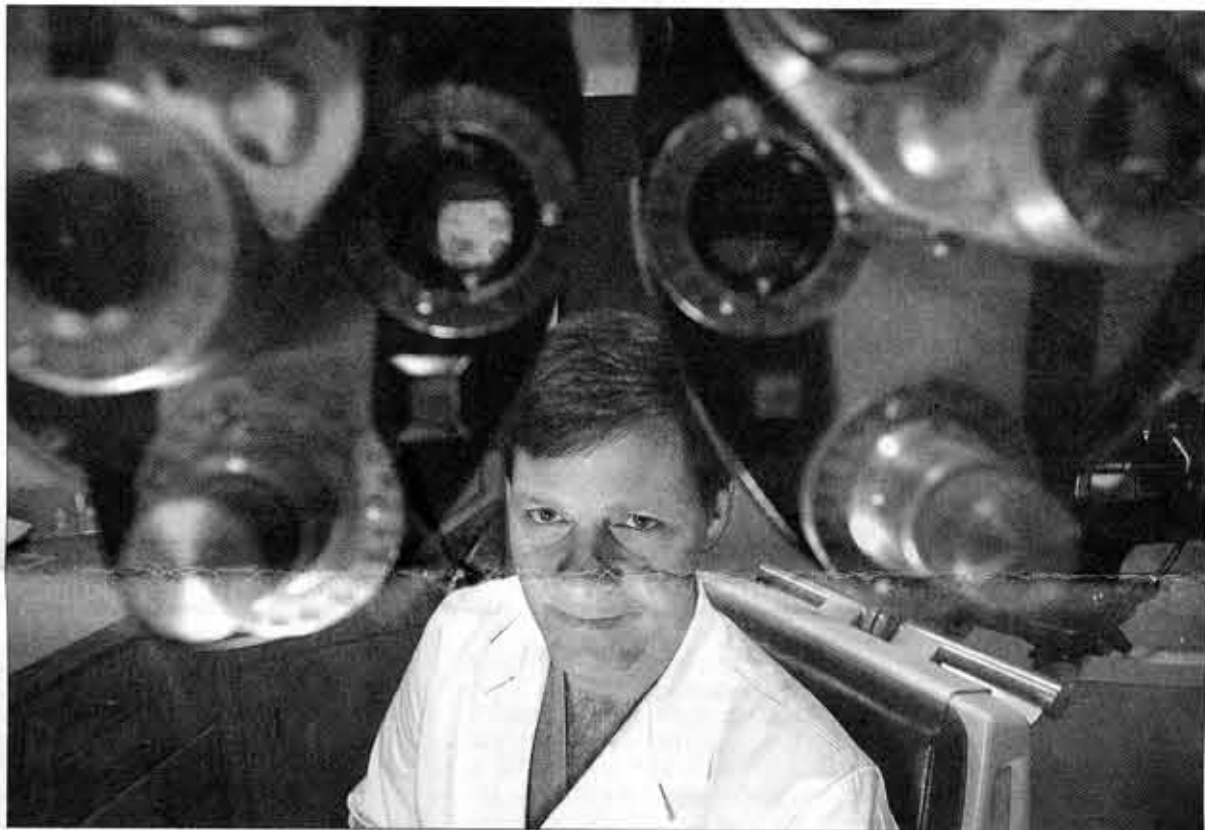
The photo shows a jagged hole where lips should be.

Several years ago in the town of Rutshuru, Astrid witnessed her husband and children being murdered by one of the many rebel factions fighting for power during a devastating civil war in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Astrid's testimony won convictions of the killers, but her bravery also provoked retaliation from the remaining rebels, who cut off her lips with a pair of scissors.

The mutilation was a disfiguring reminder of the violence inflicted upon her and her family.

In January, Fox Valley plastic surgeon Dr. Todd Van Ye traveled to the Congo as a volunteer with Doctors On Call for Service, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that provides medical care and education to impoverished communities in East and Central Africa. While there Van Ye operated on Astrid, forming a new pair of lips out of skin taken from other areas of her body.

"It's just a very rewarding position to be in. It's very rewarding to help somebody improve their quality of life," said Van Ye, who for the past 15 years has traveled to places like the Congo, Tanzania and Kenya to provide medical care. Through his work Van Ye has repaired innumerable cleft palates, cleft lips and other disfigurements. Equally as important, however, he has taught local physicians the techniques for performing these vital surgeries.



DR. MICHAEL VRABEC, an Appleton ophthalmologist, spends time each year doing work for Orbis, a nonprofit flying eye hospital. He traveled to Ethiopia in March.

Van Ye is among a number of Fox Valley physicians who are using their expertise — and in some cases their own money — to bring much-needed services and medical education to developing international communities.

From internal medicine specialists to ophthalmologists to plastic surgeons, area doctors are taking time out from their own practices to bring critical medical attention to people who otherwise would not receive care. Their work helps address devastating illnesses and crippling conditions. The physicians are working through a variety of nonprofit groups.

Earlier this month, Dr.



Okundaye



Sullivan

Michael Vrabcic, an ophthalmologist with Valley Eye Associates in Appleton, boarded a flight bound for Ethiopia carrying an unusual package. Inside a lunchbox that he had borrowed from his daughter were nine corneas. The valuable organs were used in transplants that restored sight to patients too poor to pay for the surgeries.

The operations were performed through Orbis,

a nonprofit flying eye hospital that has been set up inside a converted DC-10 airplane. For the patients, the procedures were life altering, but equally as important was the learning opportunity the surgeries provided for Ethiopian physicians.

Nearly 150 doctors observed the surgeries and learned the procedure. Programs such as Orbis are often the only means by which physicians in poorer countries receive specialty and advanced surgical training.

Doctors in developing nations often are forced to go to Europe or the United States to gain training beyond their medical

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Health volunteers

For more information about volunteer medical programs check out:

■ **Doctors On Calls for Service (DOCS)** at www.doccs.org.

■ **The Free Rural Eye Clinic** at www.frec-sight.org.

■ **The Kurgan Sister City Program** at www.foxcitieskurgan.org.

■ **Orbis** at www.orbis.org.

■ **Health Volunteers Overseas** at www.hvusa.org.

Note: The Orbis flying eye hospital's DC-10 jet will visit the Fox Valley area in July. Check the group's Web site for more information.

MISSION: Doctors join forces with nonprofit groups

From B-1

school residencies. Once overseas, many are enticed by higher standards of living and choose not to return home. As a result, developing countries often lose their most talented physicians. By bringing advanced educational opportunities to their foreign counterparts, physicians like Vrabcic hope to help doctors remain in their communities, where they can improve the quality of care.

For Vrabcic, who has witnessed some rather ingenious surgical techniques while working with physicians overseas, the learning opportunities are mutual. "It's a two-way street. A lot of these doctors have become very crafty at making due," he said.

Dr. Robert Sullivan, an ophthalmologist and founder of the Sullivan Eye Center in Appleton, has seen firsthand how the delivery of medical services can improve the quality of life for people in countries where treatment is either too expensive or unavailable.

Over the past eight years Sullivan has traveled to the Philippines with The Free Rural Eye Clinic, a nonprofit organization founded by retired University of Wisconsin ophthalmology professor Dr. Guillermo de Venecia. Through cataract surgeries Sullivan has restored sight to hundreds of patients, many in their 20s and 30s.

During his trip in January, he and another physician spent two weeks working out of the same operating room, performing as many as 25 surgeries daily.

"It's hard work, and it's very challenging circumstances but it's worth it," said Sullivan, who pays for his own airfare and food and brings his own surgical instruments.

"The patients have to be blind in both eyes to qualify for surgery," he said. "That's something you rarely see in Appleton."

One nonprofit group providing medical services overseas is the Fox Valley's own Kurgan

"We have abundance, and we have to think about what we can do (to help others)."

Dr. Ifueko Okundaye

Sister City Program, a resource exchange program with Kurgan, Russia, that features volunteer medical training.

Established in 1999 through a federally funded grant received by ThedaCare, the Sister City medical program was instrumental in helping the financially challenged Russian community set up a primary care clinic in the City of Shchuchye. The goal was to focus on illness prevention, said family physician Dr. Montgomery Elmer, who volunteers as a consultant on the project.

"(Our) work has been more from a mentoring standpoint," Elmer said. "The Russians are very educated, but they needed to focus on shifting to primary care medicine."

Though the program has been successful, the federal grant runs out May 1, and the group has yet to secure funds for continuing the medical work.

Americans generally have access to significantly better health care than what is available in many parts of the world. As a result, the average United States citizen can expect to live 40 years longer than the average

Zambian. This, said Nancy Kelly, director of the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Health Volunteers Overseas, is why efforts like the ones being made by these Fox Valley physicians are so important.

"The presence of volunteers is crucial," Kelly said. "In the U.S. we have one physician for every 450 persons. In Ethiopia there may be one for every 15,000."

This significant lack of medical resources in parts of the world has compelled some Fox Valley doctors to focus their energies on training physicians who can provide ongoing medical care.

For some Fox Valley doctors the chance to do overseas medical missionary work is also an opportunity to give back to their places of birth. This was certainly the case for Dr. Ifueko Okundaye, an internal medicine specialist who in 1999 spearheaded a mission to deliver medical supplies to Jesse, Nigeria, following the explosion of a natural gas pipe that critically injured thousands. Okundaye, who set up her practice in the Fox Valley nearly 15 years ago, grew up just 25 miles away from Jesse and attended medical school at the University of Benin in Benin

City, Nigeria.

"I probably knew their relatives," said Okundaye of the victims who lived just a short drive from her childhood home.

Okundaye's motives for helping to heal patients thousands of miles away echoes the feelings of other physicians who volunteer their skills and time.

"We have abundance, and we have to think about what we can do (to help others)," she said.

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ATTENTION AT&T CUSTOMERS

Effective May 1, 2003, AT&T of Wisconsin will increase the price in its intrastate tariff for the AT&T 10 cents offer. The price per minute will increase from \$.07 to \$.10 for those customers who enrolled in the plan prior to March 1, 2003. This price change is consistent with this same plan in AT&T's interstate Service Guides. Please call your AT&T service representative at the number shown on your bill for more information.

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✓ ULTRASCREEN A MAN APART (R) FRI.-SUN. 12:00, 2:30, 5:00, 7:30, 10:00; MON.-THURS. 5:00, 7:30, 10:00

✗ THE CORE (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 12:55, 3:55, 6:55, 9:55; MON.-THURS. 3:55, 6:55, 9:55

✓ HEAD OF STATE (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 12:05, 2:30, 4:50, 7:05, 9:25; MON.-THURS. 4:50, 7:05, 9:25

✓ BASIC (R) FRI.-SUN. 12:10, 2:35, 4:55, 7:10, 9:30; MON.-THURS. 4:55, 7:10, 9:30

DREAMCATCHER (R) DAILY 8:55

PIGLET'S BIG MOVIE (G) FRI.-SUN. 1:00, 3:00, 5:00, 7:00; MON.-THURS. 5:00, 7:00

THE HUNTED (R) FRI.-SUN. 1:55, 4:45, 7:20, 9:40; MON.-THURS. 4:45, 7:20, 9:40

BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 1:45, 4:35, 7:15, 9:45; MON.-THURS. 4:35, 7:15, 9:45

THE PIANIST (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 12:50, 6:40; MON.-THURS. 6:40

HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 1:30, 4:20, 7:00, 9:45; MON.-THURS. 4:20, 7:00, 9:45

AGENT CODY BANKS (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 1:35, 4:00, 6:55, 9:20; MON., WED. & THURS. 4:00, 6:55, 9:20, TUES. 9:20

OLD SCHOOL (R) DAILY 3:55, 9:50

CHICAGO (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 1:45, 4:25, 7:05, 9:30; MON.-THURS. 4:25, 7:05, 9:30

TEARS OF THE SUN (R) FRI.-SUN. 1:15, 4:00, 6:45; MON.-THURS. 4:00, 6:45

✓ WHAT A GIRL WANTS (PG-13) FRI.-SUN. 12:00, 2:25, 4:50, 7:20, 9:50; MON.-THURS. 4:50, 7:20, 9:50

PHONEBOOTH (R) FRI.-SUN. 12:35, 2:45, 4:55, 7:15, 9:35; MON.-THURS. 4:55, 7:15, 9:35

A VIEW FROM THE TOP (PG-13) DAILY 9:25

OPEN CAPTION CODY BANKS (PG-13) TUES. 4:00, 6:55

VALLEY VALUE CINEMA 1401 VALLEY FAIR MALL

TWO WEEKS NOTICE (PG-13) FRI., MON.-THURS. 7:00, 9:30; SAT. & SUN. 1:05, 4:00, 7:00, 9:30

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN (PG-13) FRI., MON.-THURS. 6:30, 9:15; SAT. & SUN. 12:45, 3:30, 6:30, 9:15

DARKNESS FALLS (PG-13) FRI., MON.-THURS. 6:50, 9:20, SAT. & SUN. 12:55, 3:40, 6:50, 9:20

ANTWONE FISHER (PG-13) DAILY 9:25

THE WILD THORNBERRYS MOVIE (PG) FRI., MON.-THURS. 7:10, SAT. & SUN. 1:15, 3:50

Fri., Sat. & Sun. \$3.00 BARGAIN TUESDAYS \$1.00 ALL OTHER TIMES \$2.50