CEDARS-SINAI MEDICAL CENTER® **NEWS**

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MEMORIES OF PATIENTS' GRATITUDE PROMINENT AS CEDARS-SINAI STAFF MEMBERS READY FOR MEDICAL MISSION TO GUATEMALA IN MAY

LOS ANGELES (April 23, 2004) – The memory of the little Guatemalan girl and her gift of tiny clay baskets still brings tears to the eyes of Olivia Marroquin, part of the medical mission team from Cedars-Sinai Medical Center that cared for the girl's mother. "I'm sure the gift took food out of their own mouths," she says, her voice breaking with emotion. "We're there to give to them, not them to us."

Few know the plight of Guatemala's people better than Marroquin, who was born and raised in the poverty-plagued country before moving to the U.S. 34 years ago. For most of those years, Marroquin has worked at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where she is an operating room specialty technician, and has dreamed of helping her country. That opportunity came three years ago, when she learned about a medical mission that included Alan Lefor, M.D., M.P.H., a surgeon at Cedars-Sinai.

"I always wanted to do something to help the people in my country, and then three years ago an e-mail about the trip just popped up on my computer," explains Marroquin, who is readying for a third trip in May, this one headed by Dr. Lefor. "It's rewarding to give back to the people there some of what I have gained in the U.S."

For Dr. Lefor, the May 15-24 trip will mark his sixth journey to Guatemala as part of a medical team with HELPS International, a nonprofit organization that supports and facilitates volunteer work in the Central American country. Dr. Lefor will lead the Los Angeles-based team, made up in large part of physicians, nurses, OR support staff and other non-medical personnel from Cedars-Sinai. The team is one of nearly a dozen from around the U.S. who visit the nation each year.

"You realize everyone on the team is important—you couldn't do it without each and every person," he says, emphasizing the importance of trained and careful cooks in a developing nation. "If the cooks make a mistake, everyone gets sick. Can you imagine half the team down and on IVs for dehydration?"

This year, nearly 60 people will make the trip to Huehuetenanago at their own expense, about $1,400, to offer medical care to the impoverished people who live in the "outback" regions of the country. The team will include an obstetrician/gynecologist, three general surgeons, a plastic surgeon, a head and neck surgeon and a dentist. "We don't perform major surgery because we're not there to provide the follow-up care," explains Dr. Lefor. "If a patient has a serious condition, we try to get them to Guatemala City."

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Working—and living—out of a military hospital, the team handles routine cases like hernia repairs, surgical removal of "lumps and bumps" and dental extractions, though they've also undertaken a gallbladder removal, hysterectomy and even delivered a baby.

"Guatemala has national health care, but it's only available in Guatemala City, and you can't get there without a car," he explains. "There's no health care out in the middle of nowhere. The people have nothing—they live in wooden huts. They walk for miles to the clinic when we come and then wait for hours."

Marroquin echoes this description of the desperate plight of Guatemala's people. "There is a lot, a lot of poverty," says the daughter of farmers and one of 10 children. "People really struggle to make ends meet. It's really sad. Every government they have, they don't really help the people."

Decades of political strife and economic disparity have contributed to poverty rates of more than 90 percent among the indigenous people, primarily Mayan, who populate the countryside. Nearly 70 percent suffer from chronic malnutrition, and only 8 percent of the indigenous population have access to health care.

Given these dire statistics, it is little wonder that the Guatemalan people welcome the mission teams with open arms—and hearts.

Marroquin remembers the case that prompted the little girl's gift of gratitude. Her mother had checked into the clinic suffering from an enlarged and prolapsed, or "dropped," uterus. "The worst I'd ever seen," Marroquin recalls. "It was actually coming out of her body. The doctors were able to operate, lifting and repairing the uterus."

Dr. Lefor recalls a case that illustrates how a relatively simple surgical procedure can mean the difference between life and death. A young boy, about 13 months, was brought in with an imperforate anus, a congenital condition in which the anus never became a full hole, preventing or restricting defecation.

"This child had a tiny pinhole opening and wasn't doing well," explains Dr. Lefor, adding that the team doesn't generally operate on babies. "I made a small cut and then sewed the incision—it took eight minutes but changed this child's life."

Experiences like this make planning and participating in the trip well worth the investment of time and energy, which includes working with HELPS on the logistics of travel and accommodations as well as collecting donated supplies and contributions.

"I like to travel and to practice medicine, so this combines both interests," he explains. "I really enjoy going down there—the local folks are very nice."

As for Marroquin, the Guatemala native plans to go "as long as God gives me health," she says, adding, "I try not to get discouraged with the politics. I just like to help."

Cedars-Sinai Medical Center is one of the largest non-profit academic medical centers in the Western United States. For the fifth straight two-year period, it has been named Southern California's gold standard in health care in an independent survey. Cedars-Sinai is internationally renowned for its diagnostic and treatment capabilities and its broad spectrum of programs and services, as well as breakthrough in biomedical research and superlative medical education. It ranks among the top 10 non-university hospitals in the nation for its research activities.

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