

Passport to health: Pediatrician makes his mark in global medicine

by **Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff** • Associate Editor

Robert Alan Jamison, M.D., FAAP, had never ventured out of the country when, after 27 years of practice, he launched a second career as an international medical volunteer.

The Morristown, Tenn., pediatrician has traveled to every continent except Antarctica. Last July, Dr. Jamison returned from treating Ebola patients in Liberia.

His only regret is not becoming a medical missionary sooner.

Initially, travel was “foreign” to Dr. Jamison, who rarely took time away from his practice. But after retiring in 2009 and taking a few months for soul-searching, he knew he had always wanted to practice in medical shortage and remote areas. “I came to the realization that I was missing something,” he said. Vowing never to accept payment for any of his medical practice work again, Dr. Jamison said he found a new vocation in humanitarian medicine.

He applied to several organizations and, over the years, has updated his credentials in pediatric life support, disaster response and tropical diseases in between international trips.

Battling Ebola

Last July, Dr. Jamison treated Ebola victims at Elwa Hospital in Liberia and trained local health workers. Conditions at that hospital were deplorable, he said. Everyone grappled with shortages of basic supplies such as needles, antibiotics and bedsheets, although the Ebola unit had adequate personal protective equipment. During the weeks he worked there, Dr. Jamison saw only two patients survive Ebola.

He worked alongside Dr. Kent Brantly and aid worker Nancy Writebol, both from the group Samaritan’s Purse. Writebol and Dr. Brantly made news when they contracted Ebola and were returned to the United States for treatment (both recovered). The high death risk and security problems in the area prompted Dr. Jamison’s sponsor, Medical Teams International, to pull him out early as well.

“I felt like I left things undone,” Dr. Jamison said, “but I think it was a good call.”

He returned to Tennessee July 25 and placed himself in quarantine for 21 days. He never fell ill.

Seasoned volunteer

Working in the cholera epidemic in the aftermath of Haiti’s 2010 earthquake was one of Dr. Jamison’s first ventures. He later



Photo courtesy of Robert Alan Jamison, M.D., FAAP

In Uganda, volunteer Robert Alan Jamison, M.D., FAAP, treats a boy with severe malaria who later recovered. After 27 years in practice in Morristown, Tenn., Dr. Jamison found a new vocation in humanitarian medicine. Recently back from caring for Ebola patients in Liberia, he has worked on every continent except Antarctica.

went on missions for groups such as Project Hope, Medical Teams International, Health Volunteers Overseas and the Department of Defense, often combining patient care with training of local health workers.

Dr. Jamison has worked in Haiti, Nicaragua, Indonesia, Somalia, Kenya, Peru, Uganda, Mozambique, Lebanon, the Philippines, Guatemala, Ghana and Benin, among others.

His most fulfilling mission trips were those he found most challenging.

“You go in, and there would be little or no support,” Dr. Jamison said. “The teams would be small that I worked with — close-knit groups — and I developed some very meaningful relationships with the people.” He still communicates with individuals from some of the host nations.

Getting on a plane at short notice and coping with harsh conditions and lack of supplies have become second nature. Dr. Jamison also learned to be extremely cautious and to affiliate with people who he considers to be secure, competent and knowledgeable. “It’s dangerous! There are protocols and recommendations, and some organizations just don’t have the experienced personnel who work with them. So I’ve been selective (about) who I go with ... and very observant.”

Over time, the physical demands of his work have become more grueling, though he never had an experience that made him want to quit. What he misses most when he goes on trips, which last anywhere from three weeks to three months, is his family. They were a little skittish with his last episode in Liberia.

Often asked about the tropical diseases he's encountered, Dr. Jamison said what really affects so many patients' lives are respiratory and diarrheal diseases, all exacerbated by severe malnutrition. Poor infrastructure in many of the locations adds to the chaos.

Tips for new volunteers

His advice for pediatric residents or students seeking a global health mission experience is to start small and try to sign on through a global health department. In addition, prepare well and check out contacts through the AAP Section on International Child Health, of which Dr. Jamison is a member. After arriving at a destination, don't hesitate to seek out colleagues from other groups. "You'd be shocked at how many really astute and globally famous people you run into out there in the mud and the dirt," he said.

Project Hope honored Dr. Jamison with the Volunteer of the Year award in 2013, and in 2014, Medical Teams International gave him the Volunteer Service Award. Through these groups, Dr. Jamison also earned two President's Volunteer Service Awards, which are administered through participating organizations.

Next on his itinerary is South America, but a return to West Africa is on the calendar for February.



Photo courtesy of Robert Alan Jamison, M.D., FAAP

This mobile clinic/ambulance helped Robert Alan Jamison, M.D., FAAP, reach patients in the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda in 2013 in the Philippines. He drove to remote areas to care for patients or transport them to a main hospital. Dr. Jamison said his most fulfilling mission trips are those he finds most challenging.

Passport to health: Pediatrician makes his mark in global medicine

Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff

AAP News 2015;36;4

DOI: 10.1542/aapnews.2015361-4

Updated Information & Services	including high resolution figures, can be found at: http://aapnews.aappublications.org/content/36/1/4.1
Subspecialty Collections	This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s): International Child Health http://aapnews.aappublications.org/cgi/collection/international_child_health_sub Advocacy http://aapnews.aappublications.org/cgi/collection/advocacy_sub
Permissions & Licensing	Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at: http://aapnews.aappublications.org/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml
Reprints	Information about ordering reprints can be found online: http://aapnews.aappublications.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™





THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

AAP News

Passport to health: Pediatrician makes his mark in global medicine

Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff

AAP News 2015;36;4

DOI: 10.1542/aapnews.2015361-4

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:

<http://aapnews.aappublications.org/content/36/1/4.1>

AAP News is the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. A monthly publication, it has been published continuously since 1948. AAP News is owned, published, and trademarked by the American Academy of Pediatrics, 141 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, 60007. Copyright © 2015 by the American Academy of Pediatrics. All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 1073-0397.

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

