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 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.
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