

MY EXPERIENCE IN HAITI – TEN DAYS AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

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During my third year of medical school, I had the great honor of meeting Dr. Paul Farmer. We discussed Partners in Health's focus on providing much needed primary care in Haiti—the country of my birth. Knowing that my future would be in orthopaedics, my parting words to him were, "I know there's not a big demand now, but if you ever need an orthopaedic doctor in the future, I'll be there."

On January 11, 2010, I purchased a ticket to Port-au-Prince. My purpose was three-fold: a friend and I planned to spend a few days there to meet with health care officials, reconnect with medical school staff and students that I met in 2006 and finally to see my family. Like millions of Haitians, I did not anticipate a devastating 7.0 earthquake to strike on January 12.

Upon hearing the news, a series of questions raced through my mind: an *earthquake* hit Haiti? Is my family safe? What can I do to help? Once I confirmed the news, I called my parents for updates on my aunt and cousins, but they couldn't reach anyone. Recalling my meeting with Dr. Farmer, I contacted Partners in Health to let them know I wanted to help. While Dr. Malcolm Smith from MGH was working on getting me cleared to travel, my wife and I prepared care packages with the hope that I could deliver them to my family. After an agonizing 10 days, I found myself on a chartered jet to Port-au-Prince.

Upon arrival, I immediately dialed my aunt's number without success. After dropping off my bags in my assigned tent, I set out to L'Hopital Generale to treat patients. The hospital is the major teaching hospital in Port-au-Prince and provides the majority of care for city's population. Unfortunately, it suffered significant damage during the quake and as a result all medical staff on-site faced appalling working conditions. At the time I arrived, we had no autoclave machine to sterilize equipment, no ability to take x-rays and inadequate lighting. Even before the quake, the power grid system was very unreliable. Thankfully, we received donated headlamps that allowed us to perform our work. For the patients that were lucky enough to make it to the hospital, they lay on the ground or under tents awaiting triage.

Under these conditions, we treated a variety of orthopedic injuries in Port-au-Prince and in my next destination of St. Marc, 60 miles north of the capital. I witnessed countless examples of open fractures and compartment syndromes ten days after the earthquake. In the United States, these sorts of injuries are treated within hours or risk malpractice. Nonetheless, we treated patients by being resourceful. For example, because of a lack of unreliable record-keeping, the surgical plans were written on the patients' dressings. In another case, I had to fashion a metal walker and hang weight in the form of a gallon of water to keep the patient's fracture reduced. Patient relations were also compromised at the start of my St. Marc visit due to rumors spread about our presence and amputations; however, because of my ability to communicate in Creole, I was able to effectively relieve patient concerns. We dealt with these kinds of challenges on an hourly basis, but were proud to work with appreciative patients.

As for my family, an uncle and three cousins are still missing and presumed dead. However, I was fortunate to locate most of them on the second day of the trip. Despite living on the streets, everyone is very thankful that they are alive and in good health. I'm currently petitioning for my two youngest cousins to receive visas so that they can attend elementary school in Florida. Finally, I plan to return to Haiti later this year and as often as possible to do what I possibly can to help rebuild the country's healthcare system.