

OPERATION WALK BOSTON

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Operation Walk Boston, established in 2007 by Dr. Thomas Thornhill and Dr. Richard Scott, is a not-for-profit organization committed to improving the quality of life of impoverished patients through the direct and indirect delivery of orthopaedic health care. Operation Walk Boston has partnered with a hospital in the Dominican Republic, Hospital General Plaza de la Salud in Santo Domingo, to provide free joint replacement and rehabilitation services to Dominicans who are unable to afford such care.

In March of 2009, a team of volunteers from Brigham and Women's Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital, New England Baptist Hospital and Tufts New England Medical Center, traveled to Santo Domingo for a week. The team consisted of surgeons, anesthesiologists, orthopaedic residents, medical physicians, nurses, physicians assistants, physical therapists, and operating room personnel. Over a seven-day period, the team operated on forty patients and replaced fifty-five joints. The surgical procedures were all conducted over the first four days of the trip with the latter half of the trip focused on physical therapy. At the time of our return to Boston,

most of the forty patients had been discharged home. All were left in the capable hands of our Dominican orthopaedic colleagues. In addition to providing direct orthopaedic and peri-operative care, Operation Walk Boston is determined to have a lasting impact by educating Dominican healthcare providers. On our mission in 2009, numerous teaching conferences were held, including those for orthopaedic surgeons, nurses, physical therapists, and medical students.

Patients selected as candidates for joint replacement come from all regions of the Dominican Republic. The citizens in the rural areas of this Caribbean island obtain the majority of their income through farming. However, many individuals are unable to provide for their families due to the disabling physical limitations of degenerative arthritis or trauma. The lack of basic medical equipment such as canes and walkers further exacerbates problems for these individuals; not only are they unable to work due to these disabilities, but some cannot even walk around their homes.

A testament to the quality of the team's care came in the form of a visit from a woman who had had both of her knees



replaced during the 2008 mission. “She told us, teary-eyed, how much her life has changed since she had surgery last year,” said Coleen Sabatini, Orthopaedic Chief Resident at B.W.H. at the time and the medical coordinator for the 2009 mission. “She had been in so much pain and was depressed before surgery. Now, she is able to care for her family and has an amazing new outlook on life.”

After the 2009 trip, the Executive Committee of the Harvard Combined Orthopaedic Residency Program voted to formally include Operation Walk Boston as a part of the residency program. This exciting development has meant that there are more opportunities for residents to participate in this wonderful and rewarding volunteer work. This year, three residents will be traveling to Santo Domingo: Courtney Dawson (PGY-5), Jeremy Smith (PGY-4), and Kanu Okike (PGY-3). They will join a large and motivated team, including Harvard surgeons Dr. Thomas Thornhill, Dr. Richard Scott, and Dr. John Siliski. To learn more about Operation Walk Boston, please visit our blog at operationwalkboston.blogspot.com

