



Volunteers numbering 188 strong recently participated in a medical mission trip to the Philippine Province of Catanduanes to offer medical

care to the poor in the area of Virac, the province's capital. The Catanduanes International Association began its medical mission in 1993, when physicians and nurses from around the world, who had roots in Catanduanes, committed to providing medical, dental, pediatric and surgical services to their homeland every three years. "The patients are so grateful," said Dr. Richard Rothenberg of Saint Clare's Hospital/Denville. "I've never been so appreciated in my life." Rothenberg received his medical degree in the Philippines.

When the group arrived at the Eastern Bicol Medical Center on Monday, January 10th, there were hundreds of area residents lined up for medical treatment. An older woman with a heart condition, Esther, said it had been a long time since she had seen a doctor. "I read that 188 volunteers are coming from other nations," she said. "I thank God because you are so helpful."

Estrella DeLuna, the hospital's administrative officer, said the medical mission was very important because the hospital's budget is very meager. They are authorized for 100 beds, but have 150 in use. It is hard to hire because of the low salaries. Many of the nurses are volunteers, who after two years will move on to a hospital in Manila or another city. The majority will eventually travel abroad to seek positions. Two of Estrella's sisters are nurses, one in Los Angeles and the other in Canada.

Joseph Cua, the governor of Catanduanes province, expressed his appreciation to the volunteers and said improving the district's hospitals is his priority. "The principal problem is money," he said.

Dr. Don Allegra, who participated in the mission trip with his wife Annette, son Stephen, brother and sister-in-law Drs. John and Diane Allegra, and niece Faith, shared, "I think it is great that those doctors and nurses who had left the Philippines many years ago have not forgotten their roots and come back every three years to offer free medical care to the indigent of their homeland."

The doctors found it frustrating to treat patients with outdated or no equipment. "You have to make do with what supplies you have,"

Saint Clare's Delegation Participates in Philippine Medical Mission Trip

Dr. Rothenberg said. "One must decide on the treatment based on the clinical evaluation." Dr. Arsenio Manlangit, who performed a hysterectomy assisted by Dr. Rothenberg, both Saint Clare's physicians, found the anesthesiology equipment to be in working order. Dr. Manlangit, who liked not having to wait for pre-certifications by insurance companies, said that although he does not have to worry in Catanduanes about a malpractice lawsuit, he delivers the same quality of care to the patients in the Philippines that he provides to his patients in the U.S.

Dr. Pat Dreyfuss of Saint Clare's said the doctors on the mission see patients in much worse shape because conditions have been neglected. She also said a doctor can suggest follow-up care but has no idea whether there will be follow-through or whether a patient will be able to afford the appropriate medication in the future.

Not all 188 volunteers were doctors, nurses or ancillary medical personnel. Lydia Mendez, a retired attorney from Elmhurst, Queens, who specialized in corporate law, said she had expected to coordinate the transportation of volunteers around the island, but found herself coordinating many things, including the purchase of toilet paper. The days began with Mass celebrated by Rev. Jun Reyes, a native of Catanduanes, who is now a priest in Vancouver, British Columbia. He said the team was manifesting God's love to the poor and were freely giving the kind of compassion that Jesus gave.

Dr. Manlangit, who was born and raised in Catanduanes but received his training in obstetrics and gynecology in the U.S., inspired many of the New Jersey volunteers. He has attended most of the mission trips since 1993, performing gynecologic surgeries otherwise unavailable to the island's indigent women.

"I heard about the trip from Dr. Alma Ratcliffe and Dr. Don Allegra. I immediately got in touch with Dr. Manlangit to see if I could be part of the medical mission trip," said Sr. Susan Evelyn, VP Mission Integration. "I petitioned my community for the funds to participate and they supported my request." Although some volunteers expressed frustration about disorganization, Dr. John Allegra of Morristown Memorial Hospital put things in perspective: "I've been on 16 mission trips and this is one of the best organized.



Group at dinner on final night of mission in Catanduanes. Front row (l-r): Dr. Diane Allegra, Dr. Don Allegra, Annette Allegra, Dr. Pat Dreyfuss, Sr. Susan Evelyn, Pat Roediger, Dennis Arvidson, Lisa Arvidson Middle row: (l-r) Dr. John Allegra and Rachel Santos (both of Morristown Memorial), Rachel Rothenberg, Remy Amares, Dr. Arsenio Manlangit. Back row: (l-r) Faith Allegra, Dr. Richard Rothenberg, Bob Armbruster (journalist)



Remy Amares, APN, monitors vital signs of infant in outdoor pediatric tent.