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## MEDICINE; Into Africa

By SUSAN WARNER

DR. JAMES AIKINS was visiting his hometown of Cape Coast, in Ghana, in 2001 when he met the 21-year-old daughter of a cousin who was about to give birth. "I told her not to go into labor because I don't catch babies anymore," recalled Dr. Aikins, who is a specialist in gynecological oncology with Cooper Health System in Camden. "We all laughed."

With that, the 47-year-old Dr. Aikins said, he went off to visit relatives in another part of the country. But when he returned to Cape Coast, he learned that although a healthy baby had been born, the mother bled to death two days later as a result of a postpartum hemorrhoid, a routine complication in the United States.

"No I.V. was put into her," he said. "No physician saw her. There was no hydration. No blood was given. The kid just bled out."

Dr. Aikins said he confronted the regional medical director, who told him that the hospital had few doctors -- much less specialists in women's health -- and that most students with the potential to become doctors, like Dr. Aikins himself, left the country to pursue careers in the United States or Europe.

"In those developing countries, people were dying from common ailments that don't require much to take care of," said Dr. Aikins, who is also an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

He had thought about trying to do medical work abroad for years, Dr. Aikins said, but after that trip to Ghana, "I felt that maybe it's time to make the move."

That fall, Dr. Aikins founded International Healthcare Volunteers, a grass-roots organization made up of New Jersey doctors and nurses, and for the past three years the organization has sponsored two-week-long medical missions to Ghana, a time during which villagers flock to the temporary clinic for surgery and other medical care.

Last year alone, 19 doctors and nurses saw 600 patients and performed 40 major operations. In all, more than 1,200 patients have been treated during clinics run by the volunteer organization at hospitals in Cape Coast and Pedu, Ghana.

What's more, the group is just one of many small organizations throughout the state made up of doctors, nurses and other health-care professionals who donate vacation time, surplus medical supplies and cash to tackle some of the medical problems in the developing world.

"As the world gets smaller, you feel a connection with more sections of the world and there are more organizations being formed specifically for this purpose," said John Shaffer, a spokesman for the Medical Society of New Jersey.

These days, nearly half of New Jersey's doctors are foreign-born, and many return to their native countries for short missions through organizations like International Healthcare Volunteers or individually, Mr. Shaffer said.

Following the model of other medical groups that perform plastic surgery or focus on vision or dental problems, Dr. Aikins envisioned an organization that would focus on women's health. "In most of these countries, women always come last," he said. "Everything is geared to the men, although the men are dying too."

Dr. Adam Holzberg, a surgeon at Cooper who has been on all three International Healthcare Volunteers missions, remembers one patient who suffered a fistula during childbirth, which caused her to leak urine constantly. As a result, the woman's family had shunned her for 16 years because of the way she smelled. But an operation -- one performed routinely in the United States -- corrected the problem.

Another patient who came to the clinic was found bleeding from a complication during pregnancy. "If we had not been there she would not have lived," said Dr. Holzberg. Since then he said, the woman has visited the group of doctors each year.

"She is forever grateful," Dr. Holzberg said. "Not that people here in the United States aren't grateful, but looking at it selfishly, this is a way of re-energizing myself to continue to do what I do."

K. Lorraine Bailey, the assistant nurse manager of gynecology at Cooper, has traveled to Ghana twice. During the year, she collects

supplies and equipment that Cooper would otherwise discard because it is used or the expiration date has passed. Each member of the team takes one suitcase jammed with medical supplies. In addition, International Healthcare shipped 12 crates of supplies to Ghana for last year's mission.

"We got everything over there that we needed and then some," Mrs. Bailey said.

During one operation, Dr. Holzberg and several other doctors and nurses even donated blood. Last year, the company that sharpens Cooper's scissors sharpened the organization's scissors for free. This year, Mrs. Bailey has been squirreling away linens that the hospital would have discarded because of tiny holes or patches.

"When you come back you notice what people are wasting," said Mrs. Bailey, who scolds residents who tie off stitches and discard the remaining sutures. "I say if you were in Ghana you would have to use that to the very end. Stop wasting."

While large organizations like Doctors Without Borders can have an enormous impact, Dr. Aikins said, he preferred keeping his organization small and independent.

"In a big network, things get bogged down and the bureaucracy doesn't allow you to do many different things," he said. "We tend to get things done faster without the red tape."

Dr. Aikins recalled that when he left Ghana in 1977 to study medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, an uncle told him, "You can go get the training, but you have to come back to help."

"That was my thinking," Dr. Aikins said, "that someday I have to go back and help out. But it went on the back burner for many years."