

TODAY'S HEALTH FOR THE EMPOWERED WOMAN

GLOBAL INEQUALITY IN WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE

Last month when discussing maternal mortality I briefly touched upon global inequality in women's health. I will attempt to elaborate the problem here in a concise manner as volumes have been written upon this subject. Unicef and Nato have ongoing projects as well as groups such as our own Peace Corps and the French Doctors Without Borders. Church sponsored groups and even individual physicians and nurses have traveled far and wide to attempts to ameliorate the pain and suffering across the globe. In the United States most women who seek care can be reasonably assured that they will receive pap smears, office exams, contraceptive services, mammograms and preventive medicine. Yes there are gaps that are mostly dependent upon geography and finances but these pale compared to the Third World. Medical school graduates in poor countries flock to the United States to continue their training and many do not return to their country of origin resulting in huge physician shortages in countries that have booming populations due to lack of contraceptive services. Many of these countries are financially destitute or are ruled by dictators that use their national treasuries as their personal bank accounts leaving very little for health care. In many Third World countries modern transportation is almost unheard of so a woman in labor in a distant village who encounters difficulty in childbirth is likely to die from the inability to receive a c-section in a timely manner or to bleed to death from infection or the lack of medications that we take for granted to control post partum hemorrhage. If she lives through the experience she most likely is not going to use contraception from either a cultural taboo or lack of availability. Of course lack of condoms leads to HIV epidemic and deaths in the millions from this disease. Some religions in these areas allow for polygamy so a woman's life is not highly valued. On one of my trips I was told that "we feed ourselves, then the children, then the dogs and what is left we give to the women." In countries that are bursting at the seams with overpopulation, death in childbirth, while a disaster for that family, creates barely a national ripple. So what is the solution and what can be done to try to bring some relief to such a horrific problem? Two words: money and education. Money can be used to educate more physicians, midwives and lay providers; to build clean clinics and to provide modern medicines; to provide contraceptive services; to provide access to care. Education is necessary to combat religious and tribal taboos that impede progress and to emphasize the worth of women-wives, mothers, children and grandmothers. Good nutrition comes from alleviation of poverty which is known to reduce maternal mortality and to improve the life of the child. In today's world that is struggling with revolutions and warfare and economies that are collapsing where to find the money and the will to move forward? The United States by and large leads the way though philanthropic organizations (Bill Gates foundation for example) ; entertainers (Oprah Winfrey) the Peace Corps, Unicef and United States Foreign Aid. Many medical schools sponsor physicians and physicians in training to go to these countries to try to make a difference. Many religious groups have traveling nurses that set up clinics with the aim to "teach the teachers". The task is daunting and might seem overwhelming. Every woman and every child whose life is saved is a step in the right direction. We can't change religious

beliefs but we can educate. If ever asked to help in a third world country from either a financial or personal commitment try to do so. About fifteen years ago Oswego was paired with the Caribbean Island of Montserrat through a program called Partners in the Americas. I went there to teach them obstetrical ultrasound and fetal monitoring and procured for them donated machinery. Their nurses came to Oswego to sharpen their skills and our nurses reciprocated. Oswego Hospital bio engineers even went down to teach them how to trouble shoot their new medical machinery. A great program that in some small way resulted in better outcomes. Hurricane Hugo and a volcanic eruption by and large wiped out the island but that program was a great example of what can be done on a people to people basis. That is empowerment.