

The Healing Process: Surgery May Be Just the Beginning

"It's amazing what we can do and how we can change someone's life in a one-and-a-half-hour procedure. It's incredibly rewarding."

Twenty-four surgeries in five days. Sixty-five patient assessments in one, hot, Sunday afternoon. One day to adjust to life at 13,000 feet above sea level.

These are elements in the process of providing volunteer medical surgical services in Bolivia, with patients in desperate need, offering skills that have taken years to cultivate and perfect—because not everyone who needs them can afford them.

"I think the desire to go into medicine starts with the desire to help people," says Dr. Cynthia Gregg, one of the Triangle's renowned facial plastic surgeons, based in Cary.

"The work I do is cosmetic, altering appearance in a safe and positive way. But I have learned—after working with patients of all circumstances for many years—that there is a deep spiritual, psychological, and emotional component to our scars, injuries, deformities, and general physical appearance.

"What I learn from my patients' time and again, after going through the journey of physical transformation with them, is a deep sense of gratitude, humility, and a strong sense of purpose. My work continues to help me grow, spiritually and emotionally, as a physician and as a human being."

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Determination is a part of healing: This 29-year-old mother traveled 10 hours by bus—on the hope that her child could be helped.

BOLIVIA

Many of Dr. Gregg's most powerful patient stories, the ones that have enhanced and enriched her understanding and approaches to patient care, are of children and families in distant, impoverished lands, most recently in a return trip to Bolivia. Through an organization called Samaritan's Purse, Dr. Gregg and a team of medical professionals, including one other surgeon, volunteer their time and services for a week-long surgical clinic, providing free surgical care to local residents—with a strong emphasis on providing life-altering cleft-lip and palate repair surgery to very young children.

She has, in fact, completed a number of week-long surgical expeditions in South Sudan and Kijabe, Kenya, and more recently, Bolivia.

"My experiences working with these families and children are often overwhelming," Dr. Gregg says, recalling in particular an 11-month old infant and his mother on her recent trip. "I'll never forget this one mother," she says. "She walked into the clinic unannounced, just before our final day, carrying her infant son, who had a cleft lip and palate. The village doctor had knocked on her door the day before and said 'there's a free cleft lip and palate repair campaign going on in LaPaz. We're probably too late because it started on Sunday.' But the woman told him 'No we're not,' then took a shower, left her other children with a neighbor, and got on a bus with her baby for the 10-hour ride to see us."

Dr. Gregg and her team accepted the case as an add-on to their already packed schedule, and successfully repaired the defect, much to the tearful joy of his mother. "This 29-year-old woman had taken an unplanned 10-hour bus ride with an infant,

alone, with no money, no place to stay, knowing no one. And when she came in and saw her son for the first time after the surgery, it was obvious why she had made this remarkable journey. She would have done anything to help her son. Anything."

Dr. Gregg asked the mother later if she had been worried about making such

a trip not knowing for sure if they would be able to help her. "No," she told me. "I had a certain peace it was going to be okay."

Another family, recalls Dr. Gregg, walked for three hours with their child strapped to his mother's back, then completed a two-hour bus ride, just hoping they could be seen. "When that family came in for their follow up after surgery, they were all dressed up," Dr. Gregg says smiling. "They were so happy. Really all their lives had been changed—not just the life of the child but of the parents as well."

THE ART OF MEDICINE

Understanding that healing is more than surgery, the clinic in Bolivia offers many resources beyond what the surgeons provide.

"Each intake patient was evaluated by us, then by a nurse practitioner, pediatrician, nutritionist, speech pathologist, audiologist, and dentist," Dr. Gregg explains. "There was also spiritual counseling for those in need of it. It's important to remember that the surgical work is only a piece of the treatments needed for healing.

"It's amazing what we can do and how we can change someone's life in a one-

and-a-half-hour procedure. It's incredibly rewarding. But it's not a quick fix; there is still work to be done after the surgery, which is why all these complementary disciplines are included in our assessment and plan. This is the art of medicine—getting all the right people involved."

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SCARRING

Janie was another of Dr. Gregg's patients whose story had a profound impact. She was not born with a physical defect, but rather was a victim of domestic violence.

Sometimes, says Dr. Gregg, "people will come to me wanting some small scar or blemish removed. After reviewing the risks versus the benefits of surgery, I will ask if they are sure they still want to go through with the surgical procedure. Janie had what looked to me like very minor facial scarring, and I asked her that question. She looked at me and said, 'He told me no one would ever want me because his hands would always be on my face. I want his hands off my face.' I will never forget the emotional conviction with which she said she wanted them gone.

"Working with patients like Janie has taught me that what looks like a minor

physical blemish may have significant emotional meaning attached. I've learned not to make a judgment about what's needed for healing based only on the physical exam.

"This is why I went into medicine," she concludes.

"These stories are about true healing. The role I play in the patient's progress to complete healing makes every day worthwhile." **HLI**



Janie—domestic violence victim—before and after reconstructive surgery



TRAINING, EXPERIENCE, TECHNOLOGY

Relying on her extensive training, the latest technology, and years of experience, Dr. Gregg performs the full range of facial plastic surgery procedures, including forehead and brow-lift surgery, facial scar treatment, *otoplasty* (to correct protruding ears), *rhinoplasty* nasal surgery, *blepharoplasty* eyelid surgery, *rhytidectomy* face lift surgery, and mid-face lift.

She and her staff—including a surgical nurse, scrub assistant, nurse injectors, and aesthetician—also offer a comprehensive range of skin care procedures and products, including treatment of sun damage and photo-aging, Botox cosmetic injections, laser hair removal, and use of natural cosmetic dermal fillers such as Restylane, Juvéderm, and Sculptra.

