Hope for a Better Tomorrow

The Micronesian state of the Marshall Islands has a medical environment that is far from ideal. With this in mind, in June 2006, a TaiwanICDF Mobile Medical Mission (MMM), cooperating with Taipei Municipal Wan Fang Hospital, was dispatched to this distant and unfamiliar island chain to provide health care services to locals.

The enthusiasm of the government and the people is one of the charms of this island nation in the South Pacific, but the below par medical services and facilities make it a harsh environment for sick people. Imagine no dialysis facilities in a national-class hospital, and an intensive care unit that was "intensive" in name only.

"This is not even up to the standards of general patient care, to say nothing of the privacy of the patients" said Yu Men-zi, a thoracic surgeon, when he saw the crowded wards at Majuro Hospital. Many more surprises awaited him, like the substandard tuberculosis quarantine ward crowded with people in need of urgent help, and many young amputees who had lost limbs due to diabetic complications.

Unfortunately, even when treatment is available, many patients with chronic diseases are frightened and wait until the last minute before they visit a doctor. To the members of the MMM, it was heartbreaking to see such suffering. There is a large diabetic population in the Marshall Islands. This is directly related to the dietary culture of the Marshallese. As well as posing life-threatening dangers, the high rate of diabetes also seriously hinders the productivity of the nation.

Hsieh Mao-zi, a surgeon on the team, noticed that there was a serious shortage of medical staff and no resident doctors in the hospital. The doctors here worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and left right on time. They were therefore extremely busy during working hours, and this, in addition
to the conditions in the hospital, directly affected the outpatients.

In Taiwan, doctors must finish all clinical consultations before they leave, no matter how late it gets, as long as the patient has completed registration procedures. However, in the Marshall Islands, the patients trusted their luck, crossing the seas to the capital Majuro from other islands to get to the hospital early in the morning, often only to be informed that the doctors were not free at the end of the day. Doctors took care of both outpatients and surgical cases, so it was common for staff to be tied up for an entire day. At the end of the day, those patients unfortunate enough not to be seen could do nothing but return home once the tide receded.

However, with the arrival of the MMM, the sad looks on patients' faces turned into anticipation and satisfied smiles that touched the heart of Hsien: "I wish I could do more for them," he said. But, he also admitted that "stopping" medical aid was not the solution, and hoped that in the near future the MMM could return to carry out further services and medical exchanges to improve the quality and efficiency of the local health care system.

Currently, most Marshallese medical students train abroad, with few returning to serve their people. On this visit to the Marshall Islands, the MMM from Taiwan brought 20 years of experience in the development of Taiwan's medical care system, including the concept of a public grant system for medical students to ensure that graduates return to benefit their homelands.

With the compassion, support, and know-how of its partner Taiwan, the Marshall Islands will hopefully be able to look forward to the emergence of a new generation of qualified, dedicated health care personnel.