Mission Possible in the South Pacific

More than a hundred years ago, Dr. George Leslie Mackay came to Taiwan from Canada. In his 30 years on the island, he treated the rural poor and established schools and hospitals. “Now we are capable, so it’s our turn to take care of those in need,” said Huang Chun-hsin, the current superintendent of Mackay Memorial Hospital, who served as leader of a TaiwanICDF Mobile Medical Mission (MMM) to the South Pacific Islands of Kiribi and Fiji. The trip, he observed, was a manifestation of the Mackay Spirit.

The MMM provided four days of services in Kiribi, treating more than 300 patients, and five days in Fiji, where more than 800 people received attention. As well as the standard checkups and treatments, staff members also performed several ‘mission impossibly’ on the surgical table.

One patient had suffered from a parotid tumor for eight years. An Australian medical team had reluctantly decided against operating because the tumor had grown in a critical place, and there was a strong possibility of damage to the facial nerves. Any such injury could have permanently affected the appearance and functions of the face. Huang discussed this with a neurosurgeon, who was initially also hesitant. However, one look at the patient’s desperate expression persuaded him to try.

Fortunately the surgery proved a resounding success. The tumor was removed intact, without damage to the facial nerves. The success of this difficult procedure inspired the whole team.

Another patient was a police officer with a broken
radius. Although there seemed to be insufficient medical equipment for an operation, one nurse didn’t give up and found a box of ureters in a storeroom under piles of junk. So, the team operated with what was available and restored the health of the policeman.

To Hwang Haw-kei, a specialist in pediatric cardiology, this trip was a complete education in doctor-patient relationships, and an eye-opening experience that showed him how much people take for granted in more developed countries.

He brought portable ultrasound equipment and probes for heart scans in order to perform diagnoses of congenital heart disease. To the local doctors and patients, this equipment seemed like high-tech wizardry because for years physicians here have depended on patient interviews, stethoscopes, and sense of touch to determine things like liver size and pulse, and on chest X-rays to diagnose types of heart disease.

Though they try their best to provide general treatments, the shortage of medical resources and technology has been a serious problem.

Hwang met some patients with congenital heart disease who had put off treatment. They appeared to have breathing difficulties, and – in fact – it was discovered that they were beyond treatment and could die at any time. When Hwang explained seriousness of their conditions to the families of these people, they smiled bravely at the specialist and thanked him for his help through an interpreter.

The predication of these patients reminded Hwang of a proverb from The Bible: “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones.” Thus, he hid his grave expression and tried to adopt a positive aspect as he explained that a patient’s heart had a large hole in it and was inoperable, but that, if the patient rested well and had regular checkups, the condition could at least be controlled.

“At this moment, healing the soul is probably more important than healing the body,” said Hwang. “Encouragement with smiles may bring them more happiness than focusing on their misfortune.”