A Friend in Need

Young Lilian is at an age when she should be enjoying all the beautiful things youth brings; instead she has been diagnosed as having a tumor deep inside her brain. Doctors said it would be too risky to operate.

A tough girl, she crossed the ocean from her native Palau, to Hawaii, and then to the Philippines in search of second opinions, but she got the same answer: “An operation would be too dangerous.” Not until the arrival of the TaiwanICDF’s Mobile Medical Mission (MMM) was there a glimmer of hope.

“She will be waiting to die if she stays in Palau,” said Chiu Wen-ta, director of Taipei Municipal Wan Fang Hospital, which cooperated with the TaiwanICDF for this MMM.

Bedridden for more than a year, Lilian’s brain tumor was pressing against her brainstem and cerebellum, leaving her unable to walk. The technology and facilities available in local medical institutions were ineffective, so Chiu suggested bringing her to Taiwan for treatment. Only through a highly complicated procedure with a computer-aided surgical knife and simultaneous decompression could she be saved.

Thankfully, the operation was a success and, having made a full recovery, Lilian was able to escape from the bonds of her sickbed. The story of how she was brought back from the brink of death became a legend in Palau. The local press carried large articles about the caring doctors of the MMM and their lifesaving skills. To the Palauans, Taiwan was no longer just an ally nation but an empathetic friend, prepared to share its advanced medical technology.

Chiu led the 12-person MMM to Palau in August 2008. This island nation, with a population of less than 20,000, has only one national hospital of 80 beds. There are severe shortages in human resources, technology, and experience, so patients with critical illnesses often have little hope of recovery. Any delay in medical care can be fatal.

The MMM brought along a large shipment of drugs and health care education supplies, and dedicated itself to serving the hospital, communities in the surrounding areas, and the outlying islands. During its nine days of
medical service, the team members appeared to be doing fine but their time there was not without problems.

The extremely hot weather during midsummer, and the difficulties some team members had in adjusting caused some to come down with such serious ailments that they almost had to return home. Also, there were nights that the team members didn’t even know where they were going to stay, during their trips to the outlying islands.

In Taiwan, they were used to staying in air-conditioned offices and using their specializations to take care of patients. That was all part of their daily work. But in Palau, the medical personnel could no longer think only about themselves; they had to be able to treat all sorts of cases, involving internal medicine and surgery, rehabilitation, and respiratory problems. It was a direct test of the professionalism of all the team members.

“Medical service spreads love to the ends of the earth,” said Yu Men zhi, a specialist in thoracic medicine, who was moved by the opportunity to do good for others on this overseas trip. He also saw his fellow team members grow as a result of their time in Palau, and he now knows that an austere lifestyle is part and parcel of working in remote and disadvantaged places like this. “Helping others is a kind of happiness; a bit of hardship is barely noticed,” he observed.

Meanwhile, Chiu, who is also chairman of Taiwan Nongovernmental Hospitals & Clinics Association, said that the MMM had spread love and saved people one step at a time. This not only won the friendship of the government and people of Palau, but also created a positive image for Taiwan internationally, he said.

Medical diplomacy is a very worthwhile long-term investment, Chiu observed. It not only helps people in countries that need medical attention but also inspires our medical personnel to care for patients like they are dear friends. Chiu added that he planned to take students on medical service trips in the future “so such experience and tradition can be passed down to the next generation.”