Going the Distance to Spread their Love

It is drizzling, yet flocks of people tread across the mud to come to the clinic. A team of 20-30 physicians from Taiwan and Panama is busy attending to patients in a simple mobile clinic. Expecting mothers are lying on makeshift tables for checkups. Livestock that have followed their owners are also at the scene making it quite a spectacle. All of a sudden, one person charges out from the queue and attempts to steal some medicines. Luckily, there are armed military personnel on site to keep order and thus a violent riot is prevented.

The Taiwan/CDF Mobile Medical Mission (MMM), organized in cooperation with Taipei Municipal Wan Fang Hospital, was dispatched in April 2006 to Panama and Guatemala for a month to provide medical services. The lack of medical resources and the extremely difficult medical environment reminded one nurse of conditions in Taiwan 50-60 years ago. She felt sad for the local people and during her time in Central America, came to appreciate even more the advanced medical resources she enjoys in Taiwan.

Due to the scarcity of such resources, local residents take long trips and line up for hours with extreme patience every time they hear that a medical team is coming to town. In Guatemala, the line began to form long before the clinic was opened, and remained in place until well after the clinic was supposed to be closed. Some people even waited for six hours from deep within the mountains to come to the clinic but arrived only to find that all of the consultation cards for the day had been given out. They made no protest and left quietly, in keeping with the modesty and good natures of the natives of this region.

The doctors and nurses from Taiwan were unfazed by the burning sun. They rolled up their sleeves and focused on caring for the patients, with a dedication that moved local officials.

The MMM’s work was made all the more difficult by the
fact that, for the two week visit to Guatemala, the clinics were set up in places of extreme poverty that frequently suffer mudslides. To complete the ten clinical visits that were originally planned and to give them more time for the patients, the team started early and finished late to travel from one place to another. The team might be in the mountains 3,000 meters above sea level in the morning, and then in 30°C coastal areas in the evening. This medical mission was indeed "mobile" in the trust sense of the word.

As the MMM moved between locations, Taiwanese people who had immigrated to these areas also came along to give support and backup. Their kindness warmed the hearts of the hardworking team members. Along with the team's dedication and care, their efforts help spread love across national borders and are a great form of diplomacy.

Chairman of the Taiwan AIDS Foundation, Tu Hsing-che was also a member of the MMM. He was very proud of the team, but at the same time observed that although minor illnesses can be treated on-site, follow up treatment and referrals for more serious illnesses are difficult to execute. He expressed the view that if the ultimate goal of medical aid is to bring health to people, the only way to achieve this goal is to help upgrade the local medical environment.

Tu proposed bilateral cooperation, including the construction of hospitals, pharmaceutical plants, and medical schools. In terms of the training of professionals, Taiwan will send experienced teachers overseas to offer instruction, and set up mid- to long-term medical training camps; local physicians will also be sent to Taiwan for long-term training.

It is also possible that medical schools here can team up with institutions in Taiwan to study local epidemiology or create joint biotechnological ventures to develop drugs most suited to the needs of local people.