

The Haiti Clubfoot Program

Haiti has always been a country with very limited pediatric orthopedic resources. In 1995, Dr. Kaye Wilkins, Professor of Pediatric Orthopedics at the University of Texas San Antonio, began his extensive involvement in changing the lives of the children of Haiti by starting a pediatric orthopedic program at Hopital St Croix in the small city of Leogane west of Port au Prince.

In 2003, inspired by the success of the African Ponseti clubfoot programs, he and Dr. Rick Reed from Charleston, South Carolina started what would become the Haiti Clubfoot Program. Tony Antoine, a physical therapy aide at PaZaPa (a children's rehabilitation center in Jacmel on the southern coast of Haiti), was the first Haitian technician trained in the Ponseti cast technique. He became quite proficient with clubfoot casting and subsequently helped train cast technicians from other locations in Haiti.

With success in Jacmel, Dr. Wilkins and Dr. Idgie Garnier, a graduate of the orthopedic residency program at the State University Hospital in Port au Prince (PaP), began a clubfoot program at Ecole St. Vincent in downtown PaP. The clinic at St. Vincent was very successful. The rate of surgical treatment of clubfeet dropped from 90% to 10%. A third program was subsequently started at Healing Hands for Haiti, a full service rehabilitation facility in PaP. At the same time, Dr. Scott Nelson, medical director of the CURE International Hospital in Santo Domingo DR, trained cast technicians in the Ponseti technique in Cap Haitien in northern Haiti.

In November 2007 the first national clubfoot training program was conducted in Port au Prince and the Haiti Clubfoot Program (HCP) was launched, sponsored by CURE Clubfoot Worldwide (CCW). Thirty health professionals (surgeons and physiotherapists) were trained in the Ponseti method.

The first babies with clubfeet were officially treated as part of the HCP in January 2008. Between January and December 2008, 194 children were enrolled in the HCP. 969 casting visits occurred, 144 foot-abduction braces were issued, and 100 tentomies were performed.

In need of pediatric orthopedic surgeons experienced in the Ponseti technique to help him manage the clubfoot clinics, Dr. Wilkins recruited Dr. Robert Cady, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon from Syracuse, NY. One of the problems they encountered was difficulty in providing clubfoot splints for all the babies entered into the program. As a temporary solution, a clubfoot splint re-cycling program was started at CURE Headquarters in Lemoyne, PA. Parents of children in the US and Canada who had completed clubfoot treatment were asked to donate their splints to CURE, where the splints were refurbished and subsequently transported to Haiti for use in the HCP.

On January 12, 2010, at 4:53 PM the earthquake occurred. The epicenter was in Leogane. The clubfoot clinic at St. Vincent was completely destroyed. The clinics at Healing Hands and PaZaPa were severely damaged and non functional.

Dr. Nelson was one of the first orthopedic surgeons to arrive in PaP after the earthquake. He provided orthopedic surgical care for hundreds of injured Haitians at Hopital Adventist d'Haiti, which was one of the few health care facilities in PaP that was still functional. Dr. Nelson remained at Hopital Adventist for many months and began to treat children with clubfeet and other deformities in addition to children with earthquake related injuries. He trained two cast technicians in the Ponseti technique and the Adventist Ponseti clubfoot clinic was opened. Drs. Nelson, Wilkins, and Cady subsequently organized and conducted a formal CCW Ponseti training course at Adventist in August 2010.

As the number of clubfoot patients being seen at Adventist increased, the need for re-opening the clinics at St Vincent and HHH, which were now functioning again in temporary facilities, as well as opening additional clubfoot treatment sites in other regions of Haiti became obvious.

In the past year CURE has partnered with CBM (Christian Blindness Mission) and developed a plan to expand the Haitian Clubfoot Program throughout the country. Kendy Bellegarde, a Haitian college student who had helped Dr. Nelson open and run the Adventist clubfoot clinic, was hired as the CCW country coordinator for Haiti.

In March 2011, Kendy organized a CCW Ponseti Course sponsored by ALTSO (A Leg To Stand On) at Adventist, which is now functioning as the Ponseti teaching center for Haiti. The course was given by Dr. Cady and Dr. Francel Alexis, a young Haitian orthopedic surgeon, who is currently doing a one year CURE pediatric orthopedic fellowship. Twenty-five additional cast technicians from St Vincent and HHH, as well as Milot, in northern Haiti and Les Cayes, in southwestern Haiti were given Ponseti training.

In May 2011, with guidance from Dr. John Mazur, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon from Jacksonville, FL, a CCW Ponseti clinic was opened at Hopital Sacre Couer in Milot in northern Haiti. In June 2011, through the efforts of Dr. June Hanks, PT, PhD and Medical Teams International (MTI), a clubfoot clinic opened at Centre de Sante Lumiere Rehabilitation Clinic in Les Cayes in southwestern Haiti.

There are now six fully functional clinics in the Haiti Clubfoot Program network: three in Port au Prince, and one each in Jacmel (south), Milot (north), and Les Cayes (southwest). The Haiti Clubfoot Program is one of the few nationwide health programs that has been fully restored and is successfully treating children. It has become a model for cooperation and restoring hope.

Our plan is to continue expanding the HCP until every baby born in Haiti with a clubfoot has access to treatment with the Ponseti technique. Thanks to CURE, CBM, The Ponseti International Association, ALTSO, and MTI, and the resilience of the Haitian people, this goal seems attainable.