

# Annual Uganda Spine Surgery Volunteer Trip

In 2008, Dr William Richardson, MD, Associate Chief Medical Officer and Professor of Surgery at Duke University Hospital was asked to join a medical trip into eastern Africa with Neurosurgical colleague Michael Haglund, MD, PhD to assist with operative spine needs. This began a lasting relationship between Duke and Mulago Orthopaedics. Richardson returned in 2009 with donated orthopaedic supplies, equipment and a small volunteer team and with local Ugandan Orthopaedics headed by Dr Mallon Nyatti opened a dedicated operating area in back of the spine patient ward. This allowed spine surgeons the opportunity to do surgery without having to await the long queue of patients in the main operating area of the hospital which could result in as much as a 2- to 6-month delays for spine patients regardless of urgency. Within a year of the initial opening of the dedicated



Uganda spinal ward



Uganda spinal ward



Uganda

operating room, the number of cases went from 35 annually to 195 and the number of local Ugandans interested in Spine Residency increased dramatically. A continued climb is expected so long as the efforts from the American team continue.

Local Ugandan staff battle lack of money, failing equipment, outdated supplies, and burgeoning need, yet produce enviable results. The physicians at Mulago Hospital run an orthopaedic residency program that trains young surgeons throughout Uganda and neighboring countries. This dedication from the local Ugandan community and the need witnessed by Dr Richardson and team members has driven continued visits. Dr Richardson's team is often made up of members that return year after year due to the tremendous professional and personal relationships that have developed. This relationship along with the clear effort to sustain the program is a connection that is breaking cultural barriers and the reason the local Ugandan team and community has welcomed the Duke team. The team consists of surgeons, perioperative nurses, physical therapists, counselors, anesthesiologists and biomedical engineers with intent to continue expanding their scope and impact. To continue this passionate quest requires great combined effort. The needs range from toilet tissue and light bulbs, to sterilization for equipment and operating necessities. Dr Richardson and team insist combining new technologies with a 'meet them where they are' mentality is the basis of their success thus far. The team's main goal is to leave each visit supplying enough surgery equipment and patient supplies so that the spine ward can continue sustainable operations until the team can raise funds and supplies to return again. The Duke team maintains they learn as much as they teach; gain more than they carry.

Dr Richardson's media team developed The Spine Theater Café & Jam<sup>®</sup> which features local band, food and auction in effort to support the mission in the Spine Ward of Mulago Hospital and its community. The first event's success was credited to supporting our local community so we then can support theirs. The team welcomes partners and depends on sponsorship. This year the additional goal is to prepare a dedicated recovery area outside of the spine surgical unit and to create a rehabilitation space for patients. Again, the hope is that not only will the team reach the needs of the spine ward, but will make impact that spurs momentum in community and surrounding areas. Dr Richardson's team took precaution as Ebola infiltrated the area this past January. The team is hoping to return in August. For more information or to get involved you can visit the team's website: [www.jambokampala.com](http://www.jambokampala.com).

**Donna Roman**

Team Photographer and Journalist