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Vermont health care workers return from Haiti

By Matt Ryan, Free Press Staff Writer

When they weren't treating crushed limbs, infections and spinal injuries, volunteers from Fletcher Allen Health Care were giving survivors of the Haitian earthquake general medical advice.

"Some never saw a medical professional," said Kim Schmitt, a physician assistant. "This was their chance to talk to someone."

Women who had their menstrual cycles disrupted by the stress of the crisis worried they were pregnant, Schmitt said. Nurse Courtney Walsh explained to a woman having hot flashes that she was undergoing menopause.

Patients, who had little to no privacy in the clinics, pointed out each other's ailments and asked nurses, "How do I avoid that?" said Jennifer Henry, president of the Vermont Federation of Nurses and Healthcare Professionals.

On May 19, the most recent group of Fletcher Allen Health Care workers to volunteer in Haiti returned home because classes resumed at the school they had used as a shelter. Many of them are "itching" to go back, nurse Mari Cordes said.

Over the past few months, "the focus of medical care shifted from immediate trauma needs to post trauma care," and victims of the earthquake still need that care, Cordes said.

Cordes coordinated the Vermont Medical Response Team, a nongovernmental organization founded in response to the Jan. 12 earthquake that leveled Port-au-Prince. The organization began sending groups of volunteers to Haiti in late January.

More than 100 volunteers, most of them Fletcher Allen Health Care employees, made the trip, treating the wounded for two weeks at a time. They brought food and water-purification tablets, generally worked 12-hour shifts, slept on air mattresses and took cold showers.

Most of the volunteers paid their own airfare. Organizations like the nurse's union sponsored other costs associated with the trip.

The Vermont Medical Response Team intends to send more teams to Haiti as soon as possible, Cordes said. Fletcher Allen Health Care employees have already volunteered for future trips.

"I know I have to go back," nurse Susana Knoop said. "It's a part of me now."

Knoop and several other Fletcher Allen Health Care employees at the hospital Tuesday said they developed deep bonds with the Haitian victims, as well as their families and translators.

Therapist Chelsea Witt said her patients, despite sometimes waiting hours for treatment, never complained and quickly learned how to say "thank you" in English.

The volunteers had limited resources on the island, and often had to send patients, who could have been treated in the United States, home to die, Witt said. But there was little time to mourn, she said.

“I cried a lot more when I came back than when I got there,” Witt said. “Going in there, you definitely get that, ‘Oh my God’ — but you have to get to work.”

Contact Matt Ryan at 651-4849 or mryan@burlingtonfreepress.com. To have Free Press headlines delivered free to your e-mail, sign up at www.burlingtonfreepress.com/newsletters.
