



Surgery has long been the “neglected stepchild” of primary health care in developing countries with resources largely devoted to illnesses associated with infectious diseases.

As new data emerges, attention is slowly focusing on the importance of basic surgical care as a key component of basic health care - a necessity for decreasing deaths, improving quality of life, and strengthening development for the world's most vulnerable populations.

Surgeons OverSeas (SOS): Basic facts

- Founded in 2007 by three surgeons, the Surgeons OverSeas (SOS) mission is to save lives in developing countries by improving surgical care.
- SOS focuses on **training** local surgeons, **providing** salary support and supplies, and **offering** ongoing manpower and support to *build a country's infrastructure and long term capacity* to provide effective surgical care.
- SOS developed because vast numbers of children and adults suffer from a lack of basic surgery. Most surgical organizations do important work, but focus on specialty procedures or emergency relief – ironically, surgical care was better during Sierra Leone's bloody civil war than it is today. SOS picks up where these organizations often leave off.
- SOS' programs began in Sierra Leone where overall health is the world's poorest. In its first year, SOS worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation and helped to *increase surgical cases at the main hospital by 51%*. Hundreds of lives were saved and disabilities prevented; caregivers returned to their families and workers continued productive lives.
- SOS plans to expand its program of **training**, **supplies** and **salary support** throughout Sierra Leone. Long term expansion includes implementing SOS programs in other low-income countries. Millions of people in the developing world needlessly die from simple and easily treatable conditions. SOS will pave the way in alerting policy makers and global health professionals of the dire need to improve basic surgical care and how it is an effective and cost-effective use of limited health care resources.

The Need for SOS

A young woman, pregnant and in labor for many days, a young child with appendicitis, or a young man with a broken leg and chest injury who fell from a tree while collecting mangos is finally brought by their family to the local hospital. Often there is only untrained and disheartened staff. With adequate training and compensation, a surgeon, a doctor, or even a nurse can perform the necessary procedure, but often the family must provide the supplies: gauze, IVs, scalpel, sutures



Photos: Susan Braun



and sterile gloves. Often in developing countries these circumstances result in death – a needless death from a condition with a relatively simple and cost-effective cure.

- Globally 10% of all deaths and 20% of deaths in young adults result from surgical conditions - including 500,000 women who die in childbirth each year without a c-section.
- Only 3.5% of the 234 million surgical operations performed worldwide are in developing countries. For many of the 2.4 billion people living in the world's poorest countries basic surgical care is unreachable.
- Without often simple treatments, surgical diseases increase the acute and chronic burden of disease and have an enormous negative impact on local micro and macro economies.

These statistics are the result of several major issues:

- Few trained and qualified surgeons
- Limited training and educational opportunities for surgical healthcare workers
- Insufficient and neglected health facility infrastructure
- Limited quantities of medical supplies and equipment necessary to perform safe and effective surgery

SOS' First Target Country: Sierra Leone

- SOS' Sierra Leone program began with a **novel approach** - an extensive country-wide assessment conducted in concert with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and WHO. Data was collected on hospital infrastructure, personnel, procedures and medical supplies, and recently published in a major surgical journal.
- The survey documented the **staggering deficiencies** in personnel (only 10 surgeons for 6 million people), limited medical supplies (patients are required to provide supplies), and a lack of training.
- In 2008, SOS programs in Sierra Leone cost \$35,000 and had a **significant impact**:
 - ⇒ Two 3-day emergency surgery workshops for 45 health workers,
 - ⇒ A 40' container of urgently need medical supplies and equipment,
 - ⇒ Monthly salary support for nearly 100 surgical nurses and support staff,
 - ⇒ Surgical volunteers to teach and assist with patient care,
 - ⇒ Assistance with the initiation of the first ever residency program (accredited by the West African College of Surgeons),
 - ⇒ A documented 51% increase in major operative procedures at Connaught Hospital (the largest referral hospital in Sierra Leone)
 - ⇒ Increased local hospital staff morale and decreased absenteeism

For more information on SOS programs go to www.surgeonsoverseas.org or contact SOS President, Dr. Peter Kingham at peter@humanitariansurgery.org.



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