

# Dr. Donohue's global healing mission

By Susan Girolami Kramer



David Granger from Graduate Hospital holding a clubfoot patient

## Training the Trainer

How does a physician traveling to different parts of the world avoid becoming engulfed by the enormity of the need for proper medical care? Neil Donohue, DPM, from Villanova, PA, realized this as he participated in his first mission to Peru, "I was just overwhelmed by the amount of disease both with the children with birth defects as well as patients with wounds, chronic osteomyelitis, limb-threatening infections." It was a life-changing event for him after being in practice for 17 years.

From then on, this lower extremity specialist was

determined to find a way to make a dent. He subsequently founded the World Walk Foundation (WWF), an organization that concentrates on limb and life-threatening lower extremity diseases and deformities, which decrease the quality of life for impoverished communities.

It is a very ambitious undertaking, considering a current March of Dimes report places 90 percent of birth defects in middle- and low-income countries. Dr. Donohue knows he can't do it all by himself, "I think the key to success with any kind of program like this ... that we maintain the goal of training the trainer."

Dr. Donohue has charted the course

for the World Walk Foundation's. The location points for Teaching the Teacher, will be Regional Centers of Medical Excellence: one in South America, one in Central America, and the Caribbean Center of Medical Excellence in Jamaica. These Centers of Excellence, or as Dr. Donohue has christened them "The Healing Triangle," will be where all individuals in these regions will come to be trained as lower extremity specialists, making them self-reliant and able to pass along these skills—on and on and on.

It is a concept reminiscent of the one in Catherine Ryan Hyde's book *Pay It Forward*, in which a 12-year-old comes up with a remedy to make the world a better place: one person does something to help another, that person continues the goodwill and passes it along to others, those "others" spread it around to even more people. You get the idea. In Dr. Donohue's case, it's where an individual podiatric surgeon commits to training 100

caregivers, who then commit to training their own 100, by the time the second generation arrives, 10,000 caregivers will have been trained!

## Venezuelan Mission

The World Walk Foundation recently returned from a 10-day mission in Venezuela where teams comprised of podiatric surgeons and residents, an emergency room physician, a family doctor from New York City, a nurse anesthetist, and a scrub nurse along with their Venezuelan colleagues helped change the lives of to numerous children with cerebral palsy and club foot deformities, as well as diabetics with gangrene and in need of extensive wound healing. "The procedures ranged from osteotomies, internal fixation, tendon transfers, skin flaps, and combinations of these procedures—arthrodeses, and combinations of these procedures," Dr. Donohue explains.

This type of intervention is no less than a miracle to those expecting amputation

even for just a modest foot and leg wound. Dr. Donohue observed, "There was really no vision by even the surgical establishment there to try to save these limbs." While the World Walk Foundation strives to keep the world walking through global medical missions, they are even more focused on equipping medical staff in host countries to equip them with the skills to carry on themselves.

### **Educating the Masses via Internet**

In fulfilling its goal of Teaching the Teacher, the WWF has utilized the recent advent of the Internet classroom. It's a perfect fit due to the considerable void of education in these countries, where information is needed on a daily basis. Other organizations, seeing its



The World Walk Team at Governor Chavez's office in Barinas, Venezuela, in January 2006.

potential, have recently become involved: Smith & Nephew donated a Spanish translation of their online wound healing curriculum last summer, called The Global Wound Academy (GWA); Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia accredits the international doctors, providing the CMEs; and CyberMed is made available to the international health care providers for cyber training through *Spiderweb Communications®*, a

company that provides "live," interactive courses taking place around the world. Archives of the classes and educational materials are also available.

The Cyber Classroom has made numerous inroads for the organization, one being the Wound Academy's curriculum acquired by MD students at Venezuelan schools. "We're affiliated with the medical schools, so now we can use that training for two things: we can actually

influence the medical school curriculum ... we can test people after taking the curriculum to see the impact," Dr. Donohue says.

### **Making the World a Better Place**

What makes a program of this magnitude work and reliable? The WWF interviews prospective surgeons and checks credentials because they not only will be performing surgeries as well as training surgeons and students. It's also about their



Volunteer doctors, nurses, anesthesiologists, plastic surgeons, and physical therapists, come from all over the U.S.

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commitment to such a project; mission work can mean long hours and extraordinary time management talent to make any real progress.

Dr. Donohue reflects on his experience as a caregiver of hope to the underprivileged—“A remarkable bond occurs between you and the patients.” He often recalls the broad smile of a certain two-year-old after he had both of his severely skewed club feet surgically corrected, a common defect that if caught early enough is normally treated conservatively in the first year of life. And there are so many more cases like this toddler.

Whether it's Cambodia, Peru, or Venezuela, most of these countries with limited resources are counting on the World Walk Foundation to “pay it forward,” so in turn students will become teachers, and the world will be changed one step at a time. ▼

**For more information about the organizations listed, visit their Web Sites—**

World Walk Foundation:  
[www.worldwalkfoundation.org](http://www.worldwalkfoundation.org)

Global Wound Academy:  
[www.globalwoundacademy.com](http://www.globalwoundacademy.com)

CyberMed:  
[www.worldwalkfoundation.org/cybermed](http://www.worldwalkfoundation.org/cybermed)

Spiderweb Communications:  
[www.cyber-grad.com](http://www.cyber-grad.com)

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