

# Doctors who mend hearts in war-torn lands

# W

atching televised scenes of war and destruction leaves most people feeling frustrated by their inability to help.

Not pediatric cardiovascular surgeon Richard D. Ranne and cardiologist Thomas Wisenbaugh, who work for the Saint Francis Health System in Tulsa, OK. Starting in the mid-1990s, these busy physicians have repeatedly reached across the Atlantic to share their medical skills with patients in Bosnia, Palestine, and other war-torn areas.

"We had seen reports on the news services about a tremendous backlog of routinely correctable heart defects among Bosnian children," Ranne explains. During the country's brutal civil war, hospitals had been devastated by bomb damage and the flight of professionals out of the country.

"I felt we could meet many needs there if we could just get access to the patients," says Ranne. That's when he turned to Debi Lammert, a clinical nurse specialist in cardiology at Saint Francis Hospital, who had participated in many international medical missionary trips. Lammert contacted a Christian charity, Samaritan's Purse, which had already established a program to bring Bosnian children to the US for medical care. She subsequently traveled to Bosnia nine times to transport critically ill children back and forth to Saint Francis, where

The author is a freelance writer based in Teaneck, NJ.



**Djana Kezo, 16 months of age, fared well after surgery performed by cardiovascular specialist Richard Ranne to repair a ventricular septal defect.**

Ranne rushed them into surgery.

"One of our first Bosnian patients was an infant with tetralogy of Fallot, who was not going to live unless they could get her out of Bosnia on very short notice and transport her to a center that would accept her," explains Ranne. He immediately took the case. "This little girl was so blue when her plane landed in the US that we got her from the airport to the cath lab and into the OR in one day." Thanks to the expertise of Ranne, Lammert, and the Saint Francis cardiology staff, their tiny patient underwent two successive surgeries and is now happy, healthy, and running around to the delight of her family.

During the past three years, Ranne has provided free surgical care to five Bosnian children with complex congenital heart defects. He participates in the entire process, from evaluation to transport to medical work-up and surgical repair. Before discharge, he works to ensure that the children are ready and able to be cared for again in their own country. "It's just



**Dzemil Dzical and her mother came to the US from Bosnia for lifesaving surgery.**

delightful taking care of these patients and knowing we can help in some small way," Ranne says. "Their families are so appreciative. They really ask nothing other than the chance for their children to be evaluated and have lifesaving cardiac surgery. For each family, it's a huge thing you're doing in their life, for their child."

The 650-bed Saint Francis Health System serves the four-state region

**By Toni L. Goldfarb**



Cardiologist Thomas Wisenbaugh (right) took two weeks of vacation and went on ICU duty at Ramallah Hospital, on Palestine's West Bank.



Wisenbaugh says international work is a "wonderful diversion" from the hassles of practicing medicine in the US.

of northeastern Oklahoma and surrounding areas of Missouri, Kansas, and Arkansas. Ranne is the sole pediatric cardiovascular surgeon in the 110-bed Children's Hospital division, so when he's out of the country, it virtually shuts down the operation. That's one reason he prefers to work on his own home turf in a facility where the staff is used to doing complex cardiovascular procedures. He's quick to credit the cooperation of his colleagues. "Working together on these cases on a charity basis really helps to bring our cardiac team closer together," he says. He also praises the hospitals and key sponsors that shoulder much of the expense of this project. "I know the surgery, but it really takes a team effort to

make it happen," he emphasizes.

Unlike Ranne, Thomas Wisenbaugh doesn't hesitate to hop a plane to war-ravaged countries. He's the resident expert on adults with congenital heart disease at the adult cardiology division of Saint Francis, which is served by over 20 cardiologists. Wisenbaugh also has a long history of medical work in dangerous areas. While serving on the faculty at the University of Kentucky in 1989, he took a sabbatical to do research at a South African government hospital in Soweto, Johannesburg. He wound up staying there with his family for nine years, before returning to the US to work at Saint Francis.

Lammert, knowing of Wisenbaugh's foreign exploits, urged him to participate in the cardiology department's volunteer projects. "I jumped at the opportunity," he says. "Doing international work is just extremely rewarding. It pays a different currency than dollars, something you can't get here in private practice."

In November 1999, Wisenbaugh used two of his vacation weeks to make a trip to Ramallah, West

Bank, Palestine, along with 10 colleagues from Saint Francis. "The Belgians had generously built a fantastic new state-of-the-art cardiac cath lab in the Ramallah Hospital. But there was only one doctor there who could use it, and he didn't have any experience doing angioplasties and stents," Wisenbaugh says. He worked long hours, providing the Palestinian doctor with hands-on assistance and education in the first-ever PTCA, stent placements, and valvuloplasties performed in the West Bank. By the time they departed, "Dr. Tom" and his team had saved many lives, prevented several patients from requiring open-heart surgery, and prepared the local cardiologist with the necessary skills to continue providing invasive cardiology care.

"We worked very, very hard, and the Palestinian people in turn gave us a lot of love and appreciation," says Wisenbaugh, who confesses that this surprised him. "I had thought of Palestinians as stone-throwing, angry people who were picking fights. But I learned they have rights, too, that were not being recognized, and needs that weren't being met." For example, there are only three cath labs in the whole country to serve a population of a few million people. "We've got more than that here in Tulsa alone, with a quarter of a million people," he says.

Frequent military conflicts make medical care in Palestine even more difficult. But Wisenbaugh shrugs off the danger factor. "It's an occupational hazard. I don't even think about it," he says. "If you concentrate on what you're doing, you don't have to worry about all the stuff that's going on around you. I go there and roll up my sleeves, dive in and just do medicine." ■