

MediSend Strives to Transform Healthcare in Developing Countries

A Conversation With...

Name: Nick Hallack

Position: President and chief executive officer of MediSend International

Organization: MediSend is a nonprofit, humanitarian organization that supports under-resourced hospitals in developing countries with a multi-dimensional approach to improving community health. For information, go to www.medisend.org.

Issues: AAMI and MediSend are teaming up through a Memorandum of Understanding to help promote medical device standards and increased educational opportunities in developing countries. Hallack recently talked about these opportunities and the importance of partnerships to the organization's success.



BI&T: How was MediSend launched and how did you get involved?

Nick Hallack: MediSend was originally founded to collect and ship surplus medical supplies to countries in need. In 2004, I was brought onboard to bring a new vision, mission, and structure to the organization. The undertaking led to exciting growth possibilities for MediSend and by 2005, we were beginning to see the genesis of what MediSend is today. A trip to Angola was an awakening experience for me and my staff. For the most part, the biomedical equipment we found there was in total disrepair and to make the situation worse, there were no repair technicians. From that experience, the MediSend Biomedical Repair Training Program was born. Thanks to the generosity of ExxonMobil, we were able to build state-of-the-art biomedical repair and training laboratories and to open a school to train biomedical equipment technicians (BMETs). MediSend has deployed more than 50 of the first biomedical repair technicians professionally trained to United States BMET standards to countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Angola, Equatorial Guinea,

Liberia, Kazakhstan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. MediSend takes great pride in implementing the highest standards in developing-country hospitals. Our principles and values, our core-competencies are widely recognized and respected. It is the only way that we can truly carry out our mission—to transform healthcare in developing countries.

BI&T: Can you share a success story where MediSend made a major difference in the medical technology profession?

Hallack: Often, in developing-country hospitals, essential diagnostic and treatment equipment goes unused or is used improperly because of a tremendous lack of skilled technicians to properly install, repair, and maintain it. An example of MediSend's health systems strengthening comes from a Nigerian clinical laboratory scientist who graduated from MediSend's training program. Despite having little or no background in electronics, he excelled in the program and was valedictorian of his training class. Upon graduation, he immediately returned to Nigeria to advocate change in the biomedical equipment repair processes and procedures utilized in his hospital. His professional performance and enthusiasm for change has led to the development of a national laboratory to serve as the source of all qualified BMETs for approximately 56 state-run medical facilities. Today, we are training three additional technicians to be deployed to this national laboratory.

BI&T: What is the main challenge MediSend faces?

Hallack: MediSend has experienced extremely rapid growth. The need for professionally trained BMETs in developing countries is critical. We are the only organization fulfilling this demand with curriculum, training, and technical support programs designed specifically for developing-country hospitals. The increasing number of trainees participating in our programs has put a strain on our staff of instructors. We are in need of qualified biomedical repair instructors in order to meet the growing needs of our partner hospitals in developing countries worldwide.

BI&T: What are the biggest challenges involved in recruiting and training such a diverse group of students with varied backgrounds and expectations?

Hallack: We accept trainees from a wide range of developing countries. Since the program is based on such

an intensive curriculum, applicants must meet rigorous background, entrance, and educational requirements. While we receive many applications, we can only accept the most qualified individuals to successfully participate in such a fast-track, comprehensive program. We rely on in-country partners such as International SOS to support the application and evaluation process.

BI&T: *Many humanitarian relief organizations rely on highly trained volunteers to carry out their missions. How does your program differ, and what attracts volunteers and donors to your program?*

Hallack: MediSend's model is unique. There are opportunities for highly skilled volunteers to share their expertise and transfer their skills and know-how. For instance, Baylor Health Care System conducts professional internships for our trainees. The Baylor internship enables trainees to interact with professional BMEs working at the highest level of standards in a real clinical environment. Donors appreciate our accountability and transparency.

BI&T: *What other partnerships does MediSend rely on to succeed?*

Hallack: Partnerships are the heartbeat of humanitarian organizations. ExxonMobil's generosity funded our training laboratories and has sponsored many of the trainees. Philips Healthcare made a very substantial equipment donation that helped launch the training program. We also partner with organizations such as Save the Children, the World Health Organization, the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation, Project Hope, and Mercy Ships. We have recently been invited to join The Partnership for Quality Medical Donations (PQMD), comprised of non-governmental organizations and pharmaceutical and medical supply manufacturers that share a common commitment to advancing effective drug and medical supply donation practices. Our partnership with AAMI is tremendously beneficial in helping us set standards in developing countries and introducing our mission to the biomedical community.

BI&T: *How has the current economic climate in the United States and abroad affected your efforts?*

Hallack: We have seen a drop in monetary donations and biomedical equipment donations. Some manufacturers and distributors are choosing to sell equipment that they would have otherwise donated.

BI&T: *How has MediSend been involved in the humanitarian efforts in Haiti?*

Hallack: MediSend has been quite involved in Haiti since very early-on following the devastating earthquake. We have provided several of our partner NGO's such as

Partners in Health and Salvation Army with emergency supplies and equipment. We look forward to being a critical part of the restructuring and strengthening of Haiti's healthcare infrastructure.

BI&T: *How do you help your graduates stay abreast of the latest technology that could affect their delivery of care?*

Hallack: The professional internship at Baylor Health Care System gives the trainees the opportunity to use their skills in a working-clinical environment. The internship is a very important component in the trainees' experience while they are studying at MediSend—one that will carry forward in their work in their own hospitals.

Social networking and membership in organizations such as AAMI will provide our trainees with information on the latest advances in biomedical technologies and enable them to share dialogue when questions arise.

The trainees return to their hospitals with a MediSend Mobile Biomedical Equipment Test and Repair Kit™, the largest and most comprehensive mobile unit of its kind. The kit contains more than 4,000 laboratory repair tools, supply items, and state-of-the-art test and calibration equipment essential to the repair of 80% of biomedical equipment typically found in a developing-country hospital.

BI&T: *What surprises your volunteers the most when they work with students through your program?*

Hallack: Everyone who meets our trainees has the same observations. Our trainees are very skilled and competent and 100% committed to becoming professional biomedical repair technicians and leaders in their communities. The trainees understand the value of their efforts and look forward with optimism to returning to their hospitals and beginning the mission of strengthening healthcare systems in their communities. Our graduate technicians leave MediSend having had a life-changing experience. They return home as change agents and ambassadors for MediSend.

Volunteers leave with a new sense of connection to a global community feeling inspired knowing that their efforts will bring real change to underserved communities worldwide.

BI&T: *How can biomed and other medical technology professionals get involved, particularly those with limited time or resources to give?*

Hallack: Your readers can encourage their organizations to donate biomedical equipment for our training programs and for humanitarian distribution programs, or participate in our technical support program. ■