

Volunteering for an International Effort . . .

The Mission May Be Great, the Rewards Are Even Greater

From joining in relief efforts to aid victims of natural disasters to being part of specialized medical missions around the world, biomedical equipment technicians (BMETs) continue to volunteer their time and talents to help others. Jim Fanning, BMET at Corning Hospital in New York, describes a recent trip to the Philippines with Operation Smile—a worldwide organization that has provided free reconstructive surgery to more than 90,000 children and young adults and trained more than 10,000 health care professionals in 25 developing countries and the United States.

I've always wanted to see the world and experience new cultures; that's one of the reasons I joined the Navy in the mid-seventies. Sharing my Christian faith in practical ways is also a part of who I am. Together, these pursuits led me to respond to an urgent need for a biomedical technician to volunteer with Operation Smile, the organization that sends teams of doctors and nurses around the world repairing the cleft lips and palates of children at no cost. I read an e-mail post on the Biomedtalk-Listserv that asked for help in an upcoming mission to the Philippines.

I saved a similar post two years earlier, but the timing wasn't good for me then. This time—after a quick review of the Operation Smile Web site and a conversation with the mission coordinator, my supervisor and my wife (not necessarily in that order), I accepted the challenge, which was then a little over a month away.

Leaving the safe comfort of home and time zones behind, I embarked on the unknown and uncertain. There were missions to three cities in the Philippines in February, and I was part of the team that conducted 437 evaluations and performed 233 surgeries for patients in Davao City. Several discussions with two BMETs on the organization's Biomed Advisory Board eased my apprehension about my first mission with this organization. Operation Smile did a fantastic job of providing for the travel and accommodations during the entire trip, and my costs were minimal. I received several team packets with policies and procedures,



[Left] Jim Fanning (second from left) with Operation Smile volunteers.
[Below] Operation Smile cleft lip surgery.



equipment lists, and a detailed job description for the biomed. Operation Smile teams sometimes encounter very primitive conditions; one item at the top of the list of things to bring was a roll of duct tape, which came in handy several times.

I had traveled abroad before in 1998 on a privately funded trip to Katmandu, Nepal. My goal there was to setup and educate users for a number of medical devices donated from U.S. hospitals. Language barriers presented a much greater challenge in Nepal than in the Philippines. After the first week in Nepal, I was paired up with an exceptional Nepali technician, trained in Australia, who spoke fairly good English. And I saw much of Katmandu from the back of his Yamaha 100 motorcycle as we visited electronic stores to find devices to convert power for the 120-volt American equipment.

Although the challenges of an international medical mission may be great, the rewards are even greater. The Filipino people were warm and gracious, and so were the friends I worked with in Nepal. As part of my responsibility, I assumed the role of teacher. And I found people who were hungry to learn, eager to troubleshoot problems, and appreciative of my being there. Moreover, I bonded with members of the Operation Smile team like I had never bonded at any place I had ever worked before.

Perhaps the greatest personal reward was seeing the parents reunited with their children after the surgery to repair the cleft lip or cleft palate. After participating in an effort that brings such joy

to people, the long plane rides, jet lag, occasional stomach problems, and work piled up back home, were really only minor inconveniences.

My hope is that more biomedical technicians will be moved to explore their own personal horizons, and that hospital administrators will see the value of encouraging their employees to participate in worthy charitable organizations that make an impact in our world. Operation Smile will always have a need for men and women to join their teams. Just a few weeks after I returned from the Philippines, the mission coordinator sent me an e-mail asking if I could go to Russia in June or Ethiopia in November. The first time may be the hardest, but I can testify that there will be a second time.

—Jim Fanning

For more information about Operation Smile, visit www.operationsmile.org; and don't miss a new feature film, *Smile*, inspired by one volunteer's experience (www.operation-smile.org/smile-movie). Also, see *AAMI News*, Vol. 40, No. 2, page 1 article regarding the Tsunami relief effort. To learn how you can help, visit www.aami.org for a list of organizations seeking volunteers and donations.