

Pascotto said on most missions his team chooses 10 patients to be operated on out of 15 or 16 candidates.

"The ones that need it the most and the ones that would be the most compliant," he said.

It's a difficult decision to make – a life or death decision. And a necessary one.

"There's no point in doing an expensive operation with limited recourses if the follow through isn't successful," Pascotto said.

Many of the patients are young people with Rheumatic Fever, he said, which is non-existent in the U.S. because of antibiotics. There, if you get strep throat, it can lead to Rheumatic Heart Disease, and probably death.

Some spin-offs of Pascotto's visits to the Cabral Hospital have been lectures for Santiago's residents, and local interns. Two citizens of Santiago are now in surgical programs in the U.S., Pascotto said. They both plan to go back home and start an open heart surgery program.

The Heart-to-Heart program has been a second full-time job for Pascotto, who spends many evenings and weekends organizing the next trip. That means gathering supplies from as many different people and organizations as possible, like Lee Memorial Health System and pharmaceutical companies.

"I've been doing a lot of begging," he said. "I'm always wondering when calling someone for supplies when they're going to say 'enough is enough.' So far that hasn't happened."

And the project has grown from local to national. The last trip included volunteers from San Francisco, Houston and Indianapolis, and as usual, Pascotto himself.

"It was just time for me to give back," he said.

To learn more visit www.heartmission.com or send Dr. Pascotto an email at roleerjp@aol.com, or try his cell-phone, 851-0142.

Overseas Orthodontist

Orthodontist Dr. Van R. Speas remembers a fly buzzing in the operating room of an African hospital. He was there with Operation Smile in 1996, assisting a Canadian plastic surgeon who stood over a patient with a cleft lip. Upon request, Speas handed over a scalpel.

"He was a real tight, type-A type person," Speas said. "Operation Smile had instruments, but he brought his own."

The bulb in the overhead bed light had burned out, so the team was using a gooseneck lamp, much to the Canadian surgeon's chagrin. The patient was anesthetized; his face marked where it would be cut. But the fly landed on the scalpel's tip just as the surgeon lowered it to make a first incision.



VAN SPEAS

"I thought he was gonna come unglued," Speas said.

After the surgery, the surgeon found that ants had invaded his lunch bag. These were some of the typical inconveniences of working in third-world hospitals.

Speas has been practicing in Fort Myers since 1972, and volunteered overseas for the first time in 1995 after hearing of Holocaust survivor Trudy Berger's work. She had returned to Israel and set up a dental clinic in downtown Jerusalem, Dental Volunteers of Israel, for indigents.

"I always felt that I needed to give something back," Speas said. "So after my kids were grown I started looking for different organizations I could become a part of and utilize my talents and training as an orthodontist."

Speas was the only American doctor at the clinic, he said. It was an addictive experience.



"Once you have a taste of it and the self satisfaction in seeing the good that you're doing and the feedback from the patients and parents, there's just a desire to do more."

—Orthodontist Dr. Van R. Speas



COURTESY PHOTOS

Top, a bustling street in Santiago, Dominican Republic near the Cabral Hospital, where Fort Myers heart surgeon Dr. Robert Pascotto takes his "Heart-to-Heart" mission three times per year; middle, Dr. Pascotto (second from left) and his team of medical volunteers perform a pro bono open heart surgery, one of 170 since 2002. Left, family members rest in the halls of a small, rural hospital in San Juan, Dominican Republic; below right, a home in the hills around San Juan, one of the many places Dr. Thomas Carrasquillo examines patients.

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The next year he traveled to Kenya with Operation Smile with a team of about 30.

"My part of it was more surgery that was indicated for the teeth themselves," he said. "Or making appliances that help with speech."

For cleft palates, he installed in patient's mouths an appliance called an Obturator. It's similar to an orthodontic retainer, he said, and its function is making speech sound normal.

Speas served in subsequent missions in India and the Philippines. He also flew back and forth six times to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) over two years to instruct a complete course in orthodontics for the American Dental Association.

"Some of my students in Vietnam still send me Christmas Cards," he said.

Many of his students there spoke French, and fortunately for them Speas knew the language. His first job in dentistry was in Switzerland, where his assistants and patients spoke French, forcing him to learn it too.

His last trip with Operation Smile was in 2000, to the Philippines. Speas

said he noticed a drop off in the number of patients; extremists groups had been shooting at patients and their families, he was told, as they traveled to the hospital. Later, Speas received news that the airport there, in Davao City, had been bombed. Since then, the widely traveled Speas opted to stay in Fort Myers, where he still has a part-time practice, and two stepdaughters.

Although for him the missions have ended, they still return to his thoughts anytime.

"It's just something that you derive internally," he said. "Knowing that you helped people that without you, would have received no help." ■