

Lifeline to Africa

Ottawa-based charity making a life-and-death difference in impoverished villages

By **DARREN CALABRESE**, Special to Sun Media
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Kilimanjaro District, Tanzania - Chris Fisher scans the crowd. Hundreds of locals, standing for hours in 40-plus degree heat are pressed together in a line snaking around a rundown dispensary in Tanzania's rural mountain region of Kilimanjaro.

Fisher eyes a woman hiding an emaciated infant under her shawl and immediately plucks her from the line.

With the help of a translator, he learns that the severely ill boy is only three days old and suffering from failure to thrive -- an extended period without weight gain or physical growth in infancy.

"My understanding," said Fisher, vice-president of Canada Africa Community Health Alliance (CACHA), "was that the baby had at best another six hours to live."

In a dark room acting as the pediatric unit, CACHA volunteers Kristina Krmpotic and Chantal Dass, who also work at Ottawa's Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, quickly go to work on the infant with headlamps as their only light source.

A mixture of Crystal Light and water syringed into the baby's mouth livens him for a moment. Critically dehydrated, the infant cannot muster a cry as Krmpotic and Dass introduce an IV through a vein in the head. Once stabilized, both the infant and the ailing mother, who was suffering complications from labour, are bundled into a pick-up truck bound for the nearest hospital.

Wipes away tear

As the truck pulls away from the crowd of concerned onlookers, the mother, holding her child, wipes away her tears with the corner of the baby's blanket.

During a two-week medical mission in October, CACHA handled several emergency cases that, without their intervention, would likely have resulted in death.

"But more importantly," says Fisher, "we showed the people of Kilimanjaro that (CACHA) is concerned for their health and ... willing to work with them to provide a better life in their communities."

CACHA is an Ottawa-based humanitarian organization that seeks to improve population health and provide HIV care and education to remote African communities in Benin, Gabon, Uganda, and Tanzania.

The organization was conceived in 2001 by Dr. Don Kilby, Marcel Hamelin, former rector of the University of Ottawa, and Antoinette Strazza after the 2001 Jeux de la Francophonie. During the games, Kilby and Hamelin met health care providers from several African nations. CACHA held its first medical mission in Gabon in 2002 thanks to a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency.

Out of a desire to combat the AIDS pandemic in East Africa, the Tanzanian mission was set up after an exploratory trip to the country's rural Kilimanjaro region in 2003. The poor mountain region suffers from a high rate of HIV infection (approximately 20%), due to the intersection of two major transcontinental trucking routes and the presence of itinerant workers in the tourist/climbing industry around Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Rather than compete with the region's already existing infrastructure, CACHA approached the Kilema District Hospital to partner in the region's health services. Subsequent trips with small groups of health care

professionals working in the hospital led to the first of many medical caravans taking front-line medical care into Kilema's rural mountain villages.

This past October, armed with 23 volunteers, CACHA saw 3,561 locals for 6,866 consultations, while visiting nine villages over nine days. A total of 12,859 free prescriptions were handed out, 94 surgeries were performed, and 2,139 people were tested for HIV with only 45 reactive cases (2%) -- a telling effect of CACHA's six-year presence in the region.

'Success on all fronts'

"The October 2008 medical caravan was a success on all fronts," said Fisher, who works at the University of Ottawa Health Services Clinic.

"I hope the Canadians that participated in the mission will act as witnesses to the realities of life in Tanzania (both good and bad) and will share their experiences with friends and family in order to foster a greater awareness, and concern, for the people of sub-Saharan Africa."

CACHA's next mission to Tanzania's Kilimanjaro region departs the first week of February 2009. For more information, or to make a donation, visit www.cacha.ca.