

When not saving lives at Reading Hospital, Dr. Bernard G. Vasseur performs desperately needed operations in developing nations.

©2006 Reading Eagle Company By Steven Henshaw, Reading Eagle

Dr. Bernard G. Vasseur normally expects to get paid for every operation he performs in Reading Hospital's heart center.

But the opposite is true when the cardiac surgeon travels to Asia and Africa as part of a volunteer team that repairs damaged hearts of children who would probably die without the care.

The operations are funded by the Surgeons of Hope Foundation, a nonprofit organization that raises money to provide surgery to disadvantaged children in developing countries. Each operation costs about \$2,800.

Vasseur, who resides in Cumru Township, said the volunteer work is certainly not without its rewards.

He has cultivated international friendships and has gained satisfaction in knowing that his efforts will have a lasting impact in nations where there is a need for expanded pediatric heart care.

"You are going there to help and do good, but you are the one who gets the most out of it," said Vasseur, a native of France who helped establish Surgeons of Hope in 2001 and serves as board president.

In each of the last four summers, Vasseur has traveled to Phnom Penh Heart Center in Cambodia to teach surgical procedures to a team of local physicians. He's part of a monthly rotation of surgeons who help train doctors at the first heart center in that Southeast Asian country.

Those missions have been organized by La Chaîne de l'Espoir (The Chain of the Hope), a European humanitarian association established in 1989.

"The basic premise is it's totally unacceptable that there are kids in countries with heart disease who need an operation but don't have access to it," said Vasseur, who joined the Reading Hospital medical staff last summer.

He explained that heart disease is more prevalent in children in developing countries because of a lack of prevention. For example, because of limited access to antibiotics, many children develop heart problems caused by uncontrolled rheumatic fever.

La Chaîne de l'Espoir was founded by Alain Deloche, cofounder of the Nobel Prize-winning organization Doctors Without Borders.

Deloche, who was one of Vasseur's medical school professors in France, encouraged Vasseur to help start a U.S. extension of the organization with a headquarters in New York City.

The two organizations work together to develop and carry out hospital projects and surgical missions in countries such as Cambodia, Afghanistan and Mozambique.

Last February, Surgeons of Hope organized and funded its first surgical mission. A team of eight physicians from New York-Presbyterian Hospital performed cardiac procedures on 21 children in the heart center in Cambodia.

What sets Surgeons of Hope and its European cousin apart from other organizations that contribute to world health is their focus on self-care over humanitarian aid, Vasseur said.

Ads for Surgeons of Hope in medical journals carry the slogan, "We have no pity. It's not what we bring. It's what we leave behind."

The surgeons believe the best way to save children is through empowerment. They focus on building independent, modern hospitals and on providing medical training to surgeons in those countries.

"If you don't train, you don't have a future for this hospital," Vasseur said.

The goal is for hospitals to become financially solvent within three years. Patients with the means are expected to pay a fee so the hospital can continue to provide care for the disadvantaged.

"A lot of foundations go with the idea that you go one step at a time — that you have to feed them first," Vasseur said. "We don't believe in that. We believe in providing topnotch technology to bring everyone up to level."

©2006 Reading Eagle Company By Steven Henshaw, Reading Eagle