

Local orthopedic surgeon performs life-altering operations overseas

BY JOE TASH
Contributor

Dr. Greg Mundis developed a desire to help others at an early age, as a child of missionary parents in Austria.

Today, Mundis, 33, is an orthopedic surgeon, father of four and a local resident. He recently returned from surgical missions in Africa and Saudi Arabia, where he performed life-altering spinal operations on children and adults, and helped train local doctors in the latest surgical techniques.

"It's one of those emotional highs," said Mundis of his February trip to Nairobi, Kenya, where he and two colleagues completed 15 spinal surgeries in five days.

"We worked hard. Our day started about 5:30 in the morning. We'd get to the hospital between 6:30 and 7 a.m. and typically not get home until 10 or 11 at night," said Mundis, who practices primarily at Sharp Memorial and Rady Children's hospitals in San Diego.

"We're very privileged in this country, more so in San Diego, we're among a small group of people on Earth who get to live with extreme freedom, from a social and economic standpoint. This is my way to give back," Mundis said.

Mundis and two other surgeons donated their services on the trip, which was sponsored by the Cheetah Gives Back Foundation, a nonprofit established by NuVasive Inc. of Sorrento Valley. The company designs and manufactures surgical implants used in spinal operations, along with equipment to help surgeons conduct the operations safely.

Another local resident who accompanied the surgical team to Kenya was Bryan Cornwall, senior vice president of research and clinical resources with NuVasive. Cornwall's job was to make sure the equipment and materials were sterile and ready for the surgeons' use. He also scrubbed in and assisted in the operations by passing instruments and implants to the surgeons.

"It was an overwhelming experience," said Cornwall.

Also assisting the American doctors were Kenyan surgeons who wanted to enhance their own skills in the specialized area of spinal surgery. The operations



Dr. Greg Mundis with Salma and her grandmother. COURTESY PHOTOS



Mundis performs surgery.

were conducted at Nairobi's Kenyatta National Hospital, a sprawling medical campus that includes some 1,800 beds and a medical school.

One of the coordinators from the Kenyan side was Dr. Soren Oliver Otieno, a surgeon with Nairobi's National Spinal Injury Hospital.

"It was fantastic and timely to work with Dr. Mundis. He has great skills and knowledge on spine disorders," Otieno wrote in an email.

"Spine surgery is a young subspecialty in Kenya. Most spine work is done by just about 10 doctors trained on spine for a population of 40 million," Otieno wrote. "The goal of our collaboration is to develop this center (the spinal injury hospital) so that we can be able to take care of our people well as needed."

In San Diego, Mundis' specialty is straightening twisted spines. Among the conditions he helped correct in Africa was scoliosis, a curvature of the spine caused by abnormally formed bones. In some patients, he said, the condition is so severe that the curvature is akin to

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"wringing a towel." Surgeons use screws and rods to straighten the spine.

"If you don't treat it, it keeps getting worse," Mundis said, eventually causing fatal lung and heart ailments.

The surgeons also removed a tumor pushing a child's spine out of place, and treated patients with spinal infections.

Otieno described one of his patients, a girl named Lillian, who was operated on during the surgical mission: "She is so happy and now she can look at people without fear of imagining people are seeing her as 'bending.' She can lead a life like other girls."

In addition to conducting operations, the American surgeons introduced minimally invasive surgical procedures to their Kenyan counterparts. Mundis per-

formed an operation in which a small incision is made on the patient's side to reach the spine and fuse two vertebrae, which he said was the first procedure of its kind in Africa.

In spite of the trip's successes, Mundis said his strongest memories include patients he was unable to treat because of the complexity of their cases, such as a patient who needed the removal of an entire vertebrae to straighten the spine.

Mundis said such an operation could not have been safely conducted at the Nairobi hospital because of the lack of specialized equipment to monitor the patient during the operation. He was also concerned about the ability of the hospital's intensive care unit to provide proper post-operative care.

Those cases were compiled into a "left behind" file, and Mundis said he is contacting hospital officials in San Diego to see if one or more of those patients could

be transported to San Diego for surgery. The task of arranging for such treatment is daunting, he said, because complex spinal surgery and follow-up hospital care costs about \$250,000.

It was heart-breaking to see the faces of children he was not able to help, said Mundis. "The reality is without this help they're going to die at an early age."

Mundis said he will likely take part in another surgical mission to Africa this fall.

Those who want to contribute to future surgical missions can contact the San Diego Spine Foundation in Mundis' office at 858-678-0610, or the Cheetah Gives Back Foundation at 858-909-1902 or 800-455-1476 ext. 1902, or visit www.nuvacheetahgives-backfoundation.org.