Dispatches from the Mission Field
Michael Berkeley, M.D.

It’s been two years since Dr. Chuck joined me here at Hospital Misión Tarahumara. Chuck is a general surgeon who retired from his busy practice in California and decided to become a missionary surgeon in Mexico. Since he used to practice in Palm Springs and I once practiced in Aspen, we share war stories with each other as to whose former patients were the most spoiled, difficult and “nouveau riche”. But now our patients are all terribly impoverished Tarahumara Indians. Chuck and I have literally gone from treating the richest of the rich to caring for the poorest of the poor. Since Dr. Chuck arrived, the pace of surgeries has increased significantly, and we care for much sicker patients. We perform 200 surgeries a year, and these aren’t the routine arthroscopies or varicose vein stripings that we would be doing in the United States; these are often surgeries for terrible stab wounds or gunshot so common here in the Sierra Madre where violence has become the norm. We care for neglected illnesses such as the young man Evaristo who is still hospitalized after three surgeries for a four month old case of a ruptured appendix. He managed to somehow survive for months until arriving at our hospital seeking medical treatment. And Evaristo will be going home soon—healed and whole.

All too often our patients want to give the local witch doctor first shot at treating an illness or injury, and wait far too long to seek help from us. This reluctance to seek modern health care is rooted in the Tarahumara Indians’ fear of Chabochis (outsiders) and an ancient belief that we are all descended from Satan. There is a particular reluctance to seek help for limb injuries since their greatest fear is that the injured limb will be amputated. Unfortunately, amputations of injured limbs are far too common at government hospitals; therefore the Tarahumara fear of amputation is not entirely unfounded. But after twelve years of work with the Tarahumara we are starting to see changes in their cultural and spiritual defenses. As my wife Maci says, “It’s hard to view us as children of the devil if you have just saved the life of their child.”

Here at Hospital Misión Tarahumara we are willing to invest huge amounts of time and resources to salvage a severely injured arm or leg. A year of work might be required to restore a limb, and months of work might be necessary to treat a severe burn, a perforated appendix, or a lung ravaged by tuberculosis. Fortunately, due to the generosity of our supporters, we have the supplies and nursing personnel to care for these people. Our patients have often been in the government hospitals which are crowded, dirty, understaffed and undersupplied. And more significantly, these government facilities are often staffed by personnel who don’t care about the Tarahumara. And when these Indians arrive here at Hospital Misión Tarahumara, they sense the difference. We are not hirelings, we are not out here away from our homes waiting to finish out a contract, and we are not “punching the clock.” We are all followers of Jesus with a commitment to demonstrate the love of God to a suffering world. And if a patient requires months of care, then that is more time to show them Jesus, and to tell them about the Gospel. We don’t have to answer to insurance companies forcing us to discharge patients; we only have to answer to Jesus who only asks us, “Have you been my hands and feet this day?”

The Tarahumara Indian tribe has been notoriously resistant to the Gospel. There have been 70 years of evangelical missionary work with these people, and perhaps one percent of the tribe could be called Christian (although only God knows their hearts). The vast majority of the tribe remain followers of their traditional animistic religion and fearful of the spirits that they believe inhabit everything around them.

Our goal is simple: we want to see the Tarahumara become joyful worshippers of Jesus; and as a result of that we want to see changes in every aspect of their lives. We want their babies to stop dying from malnutrition; we want their young women to stop dying in childbirth; we want their young men to have gainful employment and to learn to care for their families; we want to see an end to tuberculosis and other devastating diseases that ravage this tribe. And we want much more than this. We call this holistic missions — the transformation of all aspects of a person’s life based on a loving knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.

When Chuck and I were teenagers in the 60’s with long hair and cocky attitudes, we made fun of “Jesus Freaks”. We would have been chagrined to learn that over forty years later we would be old Jesus Freaks working away in a remote corner of the world. We were both fortunate to have had successful practices in the United States; and we were more fortunate to have been able to leave our former jobs and head to the Sierra Madre. We do talk about our former lives sometimes, but we have no regrets. God has richly blessed us both.

Chuck and I truly “operate for food”. We receive no other compensation other than the satisfaction that comes from working in a truly wonderful mission. But to keep working we do need your support. We need prayers for protection in this dangerous area of Mexico; and Mexico Medical Missions needs your financial support to buy the supplies, pay the staff, fuel the ambulance and fund the myriad of things necessary to run a hospital. Please consider making a generous gift to Mexico Medical Missions. It is this small, efficient and effective organization that keeps us working.

Blessings and Thank You—Mike Berkeley
HAPPENINGS IN THE SIERRA

Good news! The rains came this summer and the drought is over. Although the rains arrived a bit later than we would have preferred, they were enough to ensure that most communities will have a decent harvest of beans and corn. Thanks to all of you who donated earlier in the year to help MMM buy food to help the Tarahumara survive the disastrous crop failure last year. Pray that Andrew Bornman’s work to improve and diversify the Tarahumaras’ crops will help prevent crop failures in the future.

Michelle Hopkins got some much needed help with the arrival of fellow midwife Lizzy Meglich. Lizzy spent a month with us this fall and will be returning full time in 2013 once she has raised her support. Pray that Lizzy will be able to return to us quickly since the work load of delivering 100 babies a year in the new Birthing Center has been wearing on Michelle. Tarahumara women have one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, and Michelle and Lizzy will be working to combat this terrible statistic.

Dr. Mike has returned to piloting after a long absence. With all the violence on Mexican highways, Mike and Maci decided that they would rather fly over it than travel through it. Their Cessna 182 aircraft is hangared in Guachochi and Mike is enjoying getting his flying skills back. Mike started his work in Mexico in the late 80’s by flying a Cessna 182 back and forth between Colorado and Chihuahua. And now it’s déjà vu all over again.

In September we drilled the well for the Assemblies of God dormitory (albuergue) in Basigochi. This beautiful new facility will house 100 students. The AOG already operates two other albuergues. With the completion of this new albuergue, they will have over 250 children to feed and clothe on a daily basis. It’s a huge job and kudos to director Cruz Velasquez and his staff. The first albuergue has been in operation 15 years. Hundreds of children have grown up in this albuergue where they were cared for and told about Jesus. Most have made professions of faith in Jesus. The Tarahumara tribe has been very resistant to traditional evangelism methods, but albuergues such as these are raising up a whole generation of young Christians.

Thanks to Phil and Cheryl Neely and their ministry Ravens Inc. for providing funding for this new well. Can you imagine caring for 100 children without water? Cleanliness might (or might not) be next to godliness, but it’s hard to imagine children’s evangelism in the third world without water (and soap).

In October we had a week-long eye surgery outreach. Doctors David and Tina Doka came down from El Paso to perform cataract surgery. Blindness due to cataracts is common in the Tarahumara population and there are few, if any, opportunities for elderly Tarahumara to receive ophthalmic care. We saw hundreds of consultations and did 26 cataract surgeries. It was a long and arduous week with Dr. Mike working the outpatient clinic and Dr. Chuck helping Dr. Tina as the instrument technician in surgery.

And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” Matthew 11:4-6

We removed a benign tumor the size of a basketball from a woman who was suffering from severe malnutrition since the mass was pressing on her stomach and she couldn’t eat. The photograph of the tumor became somewhat of a Facebook sensation. Our Facebook page got more “likes” in a week than it had in the previous year. I’m not sure what that says about people who use Facebook, but we are grateful to have been able to restore this woman to health.

Pilot Mark Egolf and mechanic Dave Hardin returned the Cessna 185 to service after installation of a new “leading edge” which will give the aircraft better and safer short field performance. Mark and Dave have big plans for the aviation program. Visit them at www.mmaviation.com.

This year we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the sending of the first American overseas missionaries – Adoniram and Ann Judson. In 1812 they sailed from Massachusetts to Burma where they began mission work among the natives. Ann died within 15 years and Adoniram continued working for another 25 years until his death at which time there were probably no more than 25 true converts. But today there are over 2 million Christians in Burma (Myanmar) and every one of them traces their spiritual heritage to the Judsons. All of us who work among the Tarahumara sometimes feel like the Judsons. This is slow work. I often refer to it as “trench warfare.” There is no “low hanging fruit.” But Maci, myself and our co-workers feel privileged to be able to work among this precious people group. Please pray for the Tarahumara. Pray that God would open their hearts to the Good News.

Thanks for all your love and support. - Mike Berkeley

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