

# Tanzanian Surgeons Improve Care with SIGN's Support



by Hannah Corcoran

SIGN Fracture Care International brings together orthopaedic surgeons from around the world to learn from one another and improve the quality of patient care, globally. Each year, SIGN holds a conference at their facility in Richland, Washington to further educate and train surgeons from overseas.

Dr. Edmund Eliezer and Dr. Billy Haonga, orthopaedic surgeons at Muhimbili Orthopaedic Institute (MOI) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, attended the conference and shared their experiences and opportunities after collaborating with SIGN.

MOI was established in 1996 to treat musculoskeletal injuries. Patient volume was too high for the hospital's capacity. The country has 30 orthopaedic surgeons and four hospitals for a population that surpassed 49 million last year.

The hospital mainly used plates as implants, and complication rates were extremely high. Conditions improved after teaming with SIGN in November 2008. SIGN provides donations and supplies implants to the hospital.

"It became like a guardian angel to us in our fracture repairs," says Eliezer. "Now we are getting a very good result, and almost zero complications as compared to previous ones."

MOI has also partnered with the AO Foundation, Orthopaedic Trauma Association (OTA), and the Institute for Global Orthopaedics and Traumatology (IGOT), as well as other institutes and universities in the U.S. with help from SIGN.

"SIGN is communicating with those institutes," Eliezer says. "They come to us and teach us how to improve and take better care of our patients."

The organization has also helped operate surgical camps more efficiently. Some patients are up to 1,200 miles away from the hospital and have no means to get there to be treated.

"There are no orthopaedic surgeons down there," says Haonga. "We usually travel to their places and operate on them. This has been made possible because of SIGN. Without SIGN implants, it would be difficult to go there and do anything."

Though MOI is well organized, patients might wait two weeks or more for surgery. To solve this, the hospital is working with SIGN to establish same-day or short-stay surgery.

SIGN has also assisted the hospital with building a training and residency program in connection with the local university.

Recently, SIGN began to hold international conferences so more overseas surgeons can attend.

“We decided that this is very beneficial because it is more affordable for the surgeons in the region to attend,” says Jeanne Dillner, CEO of SIGN. “We get at least 100 [surgeons] at these different conferences, so we have one in Haiti, one in Tanzania and we’re seeking opportunities for one in Asia.”

MOI was the first hospital to implement regional SIGN conferences.

“Through SIGN, now we are able to disseminate knowledge for the surgeons to their regions so they can provide better care,” says Haonga.

SIGN is looking at ways to help the local surgeons learn how to more efficiently organize their hospital or OR. It is crucial for these surgeons to enhance their trauma skills due to the epidemic of road traffic accidents in developing countries that lack the necessary amount of surgeons per capita.

The organization has provided surgeons with scholarships for training programs in the U.S. where they can learn from skilled surgeons to enhance their work in fracture repair and train their juniors.

Surgeons from San Francisco have attended the conference in Tanzania to train local surgeons in soft tissue management.

“Without that knowledge of soft tissue management, (patients) could end up with complications,” says Haonga.

SIGN operates in 52 developing countries through the local surgeons and almost 140,000 patients have been treated since its founding in 1999.

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