

Bringing Canadian medical and patient care to Africa

By John Bkila
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

Chances are, any nurse will tell you when asked that a few minutes with a patient can make a world of difference — and that's why in April several local nurses will be heading to some of the poorest areas in Kenya to help treat patients there.

As part of Canadian Nurses for Africa (CNFA), 12 nurses and one support staff from Oakville, Burlington, Hamilton and beyond will be travelling to Kenya and setting up clinics to help treat those who cannot receive medical attention because of either cost or inaccessibility.

The mission, which leaves April 27, will be CNFA's fourth.

Among the group heading to Kenya is Jan Baker, an Oakville nurse of 25 years, who is joining the mission for the first time after learning about CNFA from a co-worker last summer and contacting the group's founder Gail Wolters.

"I have been looking for something like the group Gail has developed for probably 30 years," said Baker, a Registered Nurse with Halton Healthcare Services and head of patient care for the renal (kidney) program at Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial Hospital (OTMH).

"I looked at different organizations, but they tend to want a huge time commitment — usually six months to a year. For me, that's really difficult to uproot and go for a year. I have a family... I don't want to be away from them for six months,

but I still had this yearning, this need to help."

Though this is Baker's first mission with CNFA, she's no stranger to Africa. When she was 18, she volunteered with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and helped work in a hospital clinic and build a school and latrines in West Africa.

Baker said one of the reasons she chose to join CNFA was that it was a nurse-run group.

"To be with a group of like-minded professionals is like being at home for me, and the fact that it's local nurses... I loved that it would be a community adventure," she said. "What also drew me to join, I think, was the one-on-one aspect. I know from all my years of nursing that a few minutes with a patient is going to make a difference... to have someone to hear them and teach or give them what it is they need."

Wolters, who has also worked as an ER nurse at Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington, formed CNFA in 2007 after participating in a Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) fundraiser where she met Aggrey Mulamba, a Kenyan-born Canadian.

"Over a cup of coffee, we dared to dream of doing medical missions to the area of Kenya that he is from, Kakamega/Vihiga," Wolters said. "Aggrey takes care of the complexity of Kenyan politics, finds the best people for us to work with while there, and negotiates the clinic sites."

The group completes field medical missions where a clinic is set up at a different site each day and treats people as they line up.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

SAVING LIVES: Canadian Registered Nurse Suzanne Power dresses one of the many untreated wounds seen at the clinics held by Canadian Nurses for Africa (CNFA) in Kenya. This will be the group's fourth mission to some of the poorest areas in the country.

"We do our clinics in the rural areas — in churches, usually, or whatever building is made available — we're not within a village or a town... and that is to reach as many people as we can," Wolters said.

"These people have no means of transportation. They walk, and sometimes for miles, to come to our clinics. These are desperately poor areas. These people have absolutely nothing, so

we try to make it as easy as possible for them to attend our clinics."

Wolters said each year the organization has seen an increase in the number of people who come to the clinic.

In 2009, the eight-day clinic treated 2,524 patients and in 2010, 3,300 patients were treated in seven days.

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