

Haiti *After the Quake*

“It was a sea of human tragedy,”

—Delcasse Joseph, M.D.

It had been more than two days following the massive quake that rocked the Caribbean island nation of Haiti. The view from Dr. Delcasse Joseph's and pediatric nurse Sharon Eriksen's car was numbing: huge crowds swarmed the grounds of a general hospital outside Port Au Prince, the earthquake-ravaged capital. With the hospital deemed structurally unsafe, some of the injured survivors with severed limbs and gaping wounds lay in a parking lot on tablecloths and bed sheets. As Ms. Eriksen, a seasoned medical missionary, surveyed the scene of despair, her eyes welled up with emotion. “What have I done by coming here,” she thought.

From the moment they arrived at nearly 6 p.m. Thursday, January 14, until 6 a.m. the next morning, Ms. Eriksen triaged hundreds of patients. Dr. Joseph, joined by a local Haitian doctor and several other physicians from a Brooklyn hospital, performed surgery upon dozens of injured Haitians in a jury-rigged operating room made of tarps, plastic, surgical linens, string and metal poles.

“The majority of injuries were infected wounds, crush wounds and compartment syndrome, which means the limb was gangrenous and had to be amputated,” Dr. Joseph said.

Making matters worse, surgeries had to be performed only with sedatives like the drug Ketamine, since anesthesia was not available. Surgical masks and gowns were in short supply and had to be reused. Blood pressure cuffs, IV poles, oxygen and IV piggybacks were nonexistent, which meant IVs were hung from tree limbs and postoperative antibiotics were administered intramuscularly in children, not a common practice in America, Ms. Eriksen explained. And with electricity out, amputations were performed with hack saws.

“Many of these people had open fractures, meaning their bones were sticking out, and they were sitting up and



Delcasse Joseph, M.D., second from right, was a member of one of the first medical missions teams to arrive in the earthquake zone. “Many of the operations we did were salvage operations,” Dr. Joseph said. “If they were treated within 24 – 48 hours, we could have reduced the need for loss of limbs.”

smiling,” he said. “They were tolerating pain in a way I couldn't fathom.”

Over the next seven days of their mission, nearly 100 doctors from all over the world had arrived to help in the relief effort. The number of sick and wounded multiplied, too, as word got out that more medical teams were in the capital.

By the time Dr. Joseph and Ms. Eriksen prepared to leave Haiti, “there were thousands of people on the grounds of the hospital, so many that “you couldn't

see any grass because the children were lying so close to one another,” Dr. Joseph said. “It was a sea of human tragedy.”

Both Dr. Joseph and Ms. Eriksen have already returned to Haiti separately since their last mission. Ms. Eriksen recently embarked on a eight-day mission, tending to 70 children, wounded quake survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Dr. Joseph lent a hand to a hospital north of Port Au Prince that has seen its patient population swell from 50 to 280.

If you would like to help in the relief effort, call Dr. Joseph at (516) 377-2946.

