Humanitarian Experience in Cameroon

To the Editor

In June 2023, a surgical mission was carried out at the Batcham Health Center by the Recover Foundation, a Spanish NGO working towards a sustainable healthcare model in sub-Saharan Africa.

The center is in Batcham-Fiela, Cameroon (Western region, Bamboutos department). It is self-managed and self-financed by the Dominican Sisters of the Rosary Congregation. Opened in 1978, in the past year alone, it has attended to 1700 patients, providing services such as outpatient consultations, mental health care, internal medicine, pediatrics, maternity, and general surgery. The center is well-supported by a team of local healthcare professionals.

The health context of the region is hostile. Strategically, it is not well-connected to referral hospitals, and patients must travel at least 1 hour to the nearest regional hospital. Beyond globally prevalent chronic diseases, malaria is widespread as a medical condition. Regarding potential surgical conditions, abdominal wall defects are prevailing due to the heavy work of its inhabitants, mainly in rural areas. Health resources are scarce, and only very essential medication is available.

The purpose of the mission, which began to take shape in 2022, was to continue working on the foundations already laid by the Recover Foundation at the Bachman-Fiela Center. We focused the project on the center's healthcare resource and the community in which the institution resides.

It was essential for us to maintain what we had built on three pillars: the primary prevention of health, education of healthcare personnel in minor surgery, and the resolution of basic and prevalent surgical pathologies.

Based on the previously stated purpose, we proposed for this mission to perform minor outpatient surgeries for prevalent pathologies needed in the programmatic area covered by the healthcare center. Simultaneously, we aimed to offer education and training to the operating-room healthcare staff on essential aspects of the operating room and wound care. Additionally, the intention was to conduct educational talks on primary health prevention to educate the Batcham community about proper handwashing and on primary post-operative care (care of the surgical wound).

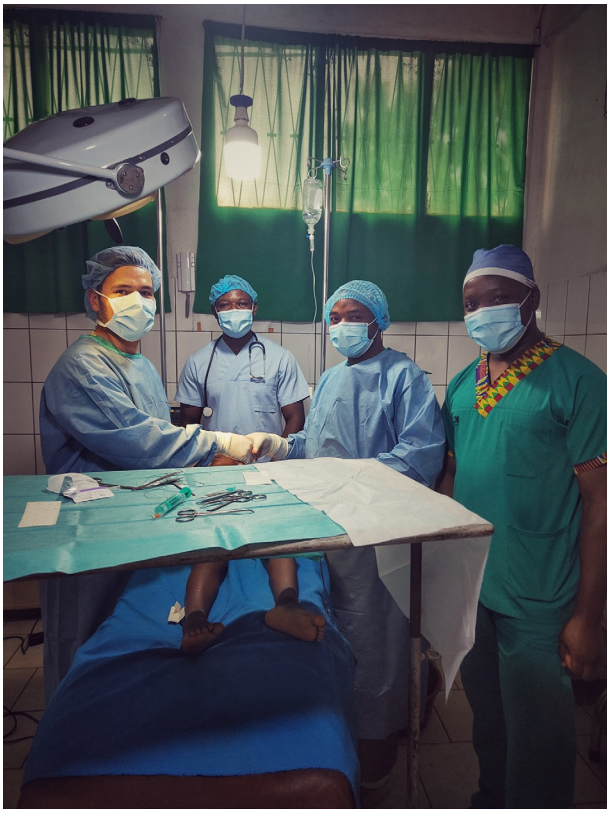

Figure 1. Execution of the first surgery of the campaign. Surgical team.

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Figure 2. Workshop on hand washing and surgical wound care.

We conducted a one-week campaign attempting to operate as many patients as possible. Although our initial plan was to focus solely on minor outpatient surgery, we eventually decided to perform major outpatient surgery (abdominal wall surgery), as it was the most prevalent pathology in the area due to the physical labor of the residents. We provided the essential materials for these interventions. Additionally, we tried to train the responsible staff during each intervention so that they could replicate the techniques after the mission concluded. In the end, 23 surgical interventions were performed, including umbilical and inguinal hernioplasty, resection of mammary fibromas, and removal of skin and soft tissue tumors.

The main limitation we faced during the mission, in addition to the expected lack of resources due to the characteristics of the center with its aging facilities, was the shortage of medical personnel. The center is in the hands of a single general practitioner who performs medical-surgical duties. Given this situation, we also took on non-surgical consultations (medical emergencies at the center) and followed up on hospitalized patients.

In conclusion, despite being a campaign that we consider fruitful, there were some surgical pathologies we could not treat due to the need for more medical resources (personnel, ventilators, prosthetics, etc.) and a longer mission time. Additionally, we decided to limit the number of educational talks to allocate as much time as possible to clinical work, as, despite considering prevention as one of the foundations of medicine, treating the maximum number of patients was a priority. One of the keys to the mission was to try to train the responsible staff during each intervention, as, in a developing country, education is the most helpful tool for growth.

Conflicts of interests: The authors declare no conflicts of interests

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