

Canada's flying doctor in Africa

Janis Hass

Jane Carter was at her home near Nairobi, Kenya, when she heard the boom. "I didn't think anything of it, but as I was driving to work traffic was flowing out of the city, which was unusual for that hour of the morning." By the time Carter arrived at the African Medical and Research Foundation, she realized how serious that boom had been.

Terrorists had targeted the American Embassy, located at a busy intersection in downtown Nairobi. Nearly 250 people were killed in the blast and 5000 were injured, many by flying glass. Carter and her colleagues spent the next week treating the victims. At the foundation office, laboratory staff quickly set up a blood donor clinic. "In the first day, 130 units were collected, which is really incredible. The second day, 600 donors turned up."

Almost 2 years later, foundation staff are still helping more than 350 of the survivors through reconstructive surgery, rehabilitation and emotional support.

Since she began working for the foundation in 1985, Carter, 47, has realized there is no typical day in Africa. As head of the laboratory program, she is responsible for developing and supervising clinical and laboratory diagnostic services. She also coordinates with African ministries of health and other health care agencies to develop training methods and learning materials, and does operational research into diagnostic systems development and diagnostic methodologies.

What that bureaucratic definition of her job doesn't include is the fact that Carter often hops into a single-engine Cessna and pilots her way to 80 remote villages in East Africa to help establish outreach services or set up a lab. Carter, one of the foundation's Flying Doctors, has a medical practice that covers more than 1.5 million square km.

Originally called The Flying Doctors, the organization was founded in 1957 by 3 surgeons who wanted to bring reconstructive surgery to East Africa. The founders soon realized that their high-flying surgical safaris didn't address Africa's basic health care problems, and the foundation was established to help communities build services ranging from primary care to specialized surgery. Today it is the largest international nongovernmental health organization in Africa, with a staff of more than 500 people, 95% of whom are Africans. It

is also at the forefront of the continent's STD and HIV/AIDS research and education. (Half of Kenya's hospital beds are expected to be occupied by AIDS patients this year.)

Carter became interested in the foundation's work while visiting a Canadian colleague working in Nairobi. "I was looking for a development job," said Carter, who had been working as staff internist and hematologist at the York County Hospital in Newmarket, Ont.

Born in Calcutta, she spent her early childhood in developing countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka because of her father's work with the British Foreign Office. When she was 9 she moved to England to attend boarding school, and later earned a medical degree at the Royal Free Hospital in London. Carter, who holds both British and Canadian citizenship, did her residency training in general internal medicine at the University of Toronto, where she later specialized in clinical hematology.

Although her current job requires a lot of administrative work and research, she is often called upon to work in the field. "You have to do everything here," she says.

Willingness to take on tough jobs is a prerequisite for work at the foundation. "We're not afraid to go into dangerous places," said Carter. Her most dangerous excursion to date took place in Kenya, near the border with Somalia. An American pilot for UNICEF was shot by a disgruntled local while sleeping in a tent close to hers. "It was one of the worst nights of my life," recalls Carter, who accompanied the shooting victim on an emergency flight back to Nairobi; he died en route. "I'm not afraid of too much," said Carter. "But I had to go back [to the village where he was shot] to get my plane."

Despite low pay and sometimes risky assignments, she enjoys a freedom and flexibility she wouldn't find in a developed country. "It's fascinating work. It's so challenging and exciting. You can develop anything you want and push for it. You can see the problems and the solutions. I'm so impressed how hard people work here."

Her advice for those interested in becoming a Flying Doctor: "You have to be flexible, very open and prepared to do anything. And you have to be able to give up your creature comforts." ?



Dr. Jane Carter: no fear