

## Tsunami of aid

Within 10 days of the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia, Médecins Sans Frontières Canada had reached its capacity for donations, but was able to garner another \$4.9 million or so for its global emergency fund.

By Jan. 4, MSF had collected \$400 000 for its tsunami work, which was all it really needed, says President Dr. Joanne Liu. Instead of turning donors away, however, MSF Canada asked them to redirect their donations to its emergency fund: 90% agreed. This netted about \$4.9 million for the fund, which enables MSF to respond quickly to international emergencies. For example, MSF was working in Darfur, Sudan, 9 months before that crisis made international headlines.

“For us it’s a question of being transparent and honest with donors. We don’t want to take

donations for  $x$  and spend it on  $y$ ,” says Liu.

In Indonesia, MSF brought support to city hospitals and mobile clinics for displaced people. Over the next year or so, it will focus on helping the country rebuild medical capacity; 8 Canadians and 110 other MSF workers plus 200 national staff are now at work in the area.

Days after the tsunami hit, 250 non-governmental organizations and a dozen armies were setting up in Indonesia. But this outpouring of support had its disadvantages. “To a certain extent, the presence of so many helping bodies, each of which needed administrative support [from local people] slowed down the deployment of aid,” says Liu. By contrast, only 3 NGOs are working in Darfur.

Many of the NGOs simply didn’t have the necessary expertise to help out. “People should



Francesco Zizola

**At the peak of the emergency, MSF had 118 volunteers working in Indonesia.**

know the limits of what they can do,” says Liu, who worked in Indonesia Jan. 12 to Feb. 24.

“People were trying to do vaccinations who had never done it before. They got money from donors and started, but didn’t finish. It’s a problem.”

MSF stopped accepting tsunami donations because it had enough money to do what it does best. “We are doctors without borders, not construction workers without borders,” says Liu. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*