

## **Dr. Alex Meza travels to Nicaragua to provide care**

*Rich Suwanski. McClatchy - Tribune Business News. Washington: Sep 20, 2010.*

Sept. 20--When Owensboro's Dr. Alex Meza went on a medical mission trip to Nicaragua last month, it wasn't because of a specific disaster, like Hurricane Mitch that killed thousands there in 1998. He went because of that country's ongoing need for care and his desire to help.

Meza, a 46-year-old anesthesiologist with Owensboro Anesthesia Services, had been on three previous medical mission trips to his native Ecuador since 2001. But when the opportunity to go to Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, arose last year, Meza signed up.

"Their problems run quite deep," Meza said. "They're grateful for any assistance they receive."

Meza was one of the 65 International Medical Alliance volunteers who provided medical services to 8,446 people on their 10-day trip. The services included 120 surgeries, 695 dental procedures, 949 pediatric and 1,465 internal medicine consultations on everything from urinary tract infections to earaches, stomachaches, joint pains, tropical skin rashes and allergy related ailments.

"These are really poor folks," Meza said. "On a good day, they subsist. On a bad day ... there is misery."

"But the people are strong. They're resilient. They showed up for medical interviews barefoot, with thick callouses or open wounds that couldn't be treated."

"There are medical conditions that not one of us in this country would put up with for a day or two, but there, they have to live with for years and years."

"We were truly working with the poorest of the poor."

Meza's group worked in Somoto in the province of Madriz in northwestern Nicaragua. It is in the central highlands near the upper Coco River and serves as a commercial center.

Meza saw one man die from complications from appendicitis. The man developed peritonitis, sepsis and died.

"You would not see that in this country," he said. "There would be lawsuits, an outcry."

"But it took this poor guy two days to get down out of the mountains into town and by that time, it was too late."

"These are tough folks. They don't want to complain about anything. They go hungry and cold all the time. If they complain about something, they're a drag on the family."

Working conditions left a lot to be desired. Meza worked in an operating room that was "primitive and rustic" by American standards, he said.

"If you talk to some of the (medical personnel) who went to Haiti, they were doing surgeries under tents," Meza said. "This was nowhere as austere as that, but there were flies and ants in the operating rooms, and we had to measure every bit of medical supplies we had, and we used them very judiciously."

"That's standard operating environment for mission work."

Meza said the biggest barriers included the language, but he speaks Spanish, so he helped bridge the communication gap, and the limited amount of time his group had to help.

"The biggest barrier was not having enough hours in the day to do what you needed to," he said. "We worked 10 hours a day, and then an hour for cleanup, and in mission work, that's a short day."

Meza said his group was welcomed with open arms, appreciated by both patients and Nicaraguan medical personnel.

"The people were very grateful, even though we couldn't help everybody," Meza said. "I'm going back next year. I think (the program) is wonderful."

"The vast majority of people going on mission trips want to give it as big of an effort as they can, make the biggest impact they can, realizing there's always more work to be done."