

Healing Haiti: Local surgeon one of first responders after earthquake

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WINCHESTER -- Setting foot in Haiti just days after the devastating Jan. 12 earthquake, Winchester surgeon Dr. Irfan Galaria was reminded of a war zone.

He would know, having been part of a medical aid team to Gaza last winter following an Israeli bombing campaign.

"My initial reaction [in Haiti], I was very shocked to how similar the situation seemed, but in Gaza it was man-made, it was from missiles," said Galaria, sitting in his office at his recently opened practice, Galaria Plastic Surgery and Hand Surgery, in Winchester.

The earthquake occurred on a Tuesday, and within a day, Galaria, who performs mainly reconstructive and hand surgery and has a lot of experience in trauma and wound care, knew what he had to do.

"Wednesday, I talked to my wife about it," he said. "I really wanted to go."

His father flew in from Michigan to stay at the Galarias' Loudoun County home to help Galaria's wife, a dermatologist who is nearing the end of her pregnancy with their fourth child.

"I sort of felt that there was a lot of talk about [helping], a lot of people were concerned," he said. "What I saw, their biggest need obviously was immediate. That's why I tried to leave so quickly with these doctors."

Galaria led a team of four other doctors who flew to the Dominican Republic before driving to Haiti through a relief program run by the Islamic Medical Association of North America, the same organization with which he did mission work in Palestine. IMANA has



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Dr. Irfan Galaria, a plastic surgeon and hand surgery specialist in Winchester, talks about his recent trip to Haiti. Dennis Grundman/Daily





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Galaria poses with a Haitian doctor in Haiti, where he spent five days assisting the injured and teaching others to help. Courtesy photo



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A foosball table became a bed for pediatric patients, while a popcorn cart was used to hold medical supplies at a medical clinic set up by doctors with the Islamic Medical Association of North America at an amusement park in Port-au-Prince. Courtesy photo

responded to several disasters, including the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and an earthquake in Pakistan, Galaria said.

They arrived within five days of the quake and stayed five days. The plan was to assess the situation, find out what facilities could be used for medical purposes and "set up a mini-hospital, a tent hospital," Galaria said.

"We were one of the first physician teams down there," said Galaria, 33.

Upon arrival, he asked Haitians how they were and if their families were OK. Nearly all had lost loved ones.

"Within one hour I stopped asking that question because it was devastating to hear that over and over again," Galaria said.

In one small village, a man was asked if there were any more dead or trapped people left, and he said he didn't think so "because I can't smell anything anymore," Galaria recalled. Streets were just filled with piles of the dead, he said.

Treating patients in Haiti took a great deal of innovation. A small amusement park was converted into a make-shift medical clinic for the IMANA doctors. Its four walls and barbed wire ensured security.

An air hockey table served as a bed for patients, with a foosball table used for children. A popcorn cart held medical supplies. Restaurant shelves became a

pharmacy.

"We really had to adapt, frankly, to what we had," Galaria said. "We had very little."

Instruments were sterilized on a propane grill. Pieces of wood found around the park and string were fashioned into splints.

"The only supplies we had were the supplies that we brought with us on our backs," Galaria said. "It was a challenging situation, but we had to make the best of what we had. I think conditions have improved much since then."

The doctors saw a lot of fractures, a lot of infected wounds, Galaria said. He trained a psychiatrist in the group to handle wound care.

Galaria, who slept on the ground, brought local anesthesia with him, but many patients with fractures only received ibuprofen to treat pain. Since then, general anesthesia has arrived at the park, an

operating room has been set up and there are about 20 patient beds, and mobile clinics have been working with other organizations.

IMANA teams of 10 to 15 doctors are rotating in and out of Haiti every week, with almost 100 physicians signed up to volunteer, Galaria said. Some of the doctors are working with an organization set up by actor Sean Penn, who visited the clinic at the amusement park, he said.

Galaria traveled around Port-au-Prince tent cities with a translator.

"There were pockets of these groups of people who hadn't received any food or water seven days out of the earthquake, had not had any treatment," he said.

While Galaria did treat patients, his main focus was to scout what was needed for future IMANA teams, what facilities were available and what was most needed, and coordinate with other aid agencies, while his fellow physicians treated patients at the park.

The Haitians were very grateful for the help they were receiving, Galaria said.

"They completely trusted us," he said. "I think we made a significant impact."

Still, there was frustration among the residents.

"What they were most frustrated with was how can they be so close to America and these Western nations and how can the response be so delayed," Galaria said.

Some people were four miles from the airport and still were without food and water, he said.

Galaria thinks engineers are desperately needed to help Haiti.

"The reason why is because we have an earthquake, and now you have buildings that are unstable or with cracks," he said. "People don't know if [it's] safe to go back."

A hospital with two or three operating rooms sat abandoned, Galaria said, because "they were afraid of the cracks. This whole, well-equipped hospital."

Galaria's most memorable patient was his first one, a woman with a pelvic fracture who had been lying down for six days. By wrapping her hip and giving her ibuprofen and crutches, he helped her be mobile again.

"Something very small, but in her life, I think it made a big impact," Galaria said. "I think what I will remember most is clearly this is a very tragic situation, but I was very impressed with how people have come together to collaborate and do what they need to do to help the people of Haiti. I saw a situation where people who have never met each other before were taking care of each other like brothers because they were all working for a common goal."

And, the surgeon hopes that work being done by Muslims working with IMANA can improve Islam's image in America.

"I think, to be honest, the perception of Muslims is pretty poor in America," Galaria said. "I think what I would like most people to appreciate [is] that 99.9 percent of Muslims here in America are honest citizens who care about their country and the well-being of Americans."

IMANA responds to international crises regardless of the prevailing religion in those countries, he said.

"Maybe what the organization is doing reflects what Islam's really about," Galaria said. "It's not just

Islam. It's what I think any religion is really about."