

## Our Medical Trash, Third World Treasure

5 February 2005

by Erin Madden

AFTER returning from a medical mission to Ecuador in 1997, Phyllis Reader became acutely aware of how much waste was being generated by the Canadian medical system.

An operating room nurse at St. Boniface General Hospital, she was appalled that developing countries had virtually nothing in the way of medical supplies, yet every year millions of dollars worth of supplies and equipment was ending up in the trash here at home.

She knew something had to be done.

With the help of colleagues and friends, and the use of her church's attic space, she established International H.O.P.E Canada. Since its modest beginning nearly eight years ago, millions of dollars worth of medical supplies and equipment have been saved and sent to Third World countries.

"When the concept evolved initially, it was to make a difference," explained Reader, who is currently serving as president of International H.O.P.E's board of directors.

"We have so much here, and what was amplified through this initiative was the disposable society that we live in."

"There is a tremendous amount of waste, and if we can harness that by recycling, it's costing nothing. There is no dollar value, and to these countries, it's like gold," said Reader.

She adds that all the supplies sent overseas are clean and safe, but due to Canadian health code standards, they cannot be used here at home.

"A box of work gloves that expired in April 2004 -- here we would throw out that box of gloves," said Reader.

"Here you are not allowed to use it because of liability issues. But in Africa, where they're working with specimens of AIDS and hepatitis and have no protection, that box of gloves is like gold. They don't care about the expiry date."

Fellow volunteer Roma Maconachie, who serves as director of volunteers, adds that there is also a lot of waste when a Canadian patient's course of treatment changes or when a patient dies. Often a box of medical supplies is assigned to a patient, with individually wrapped sections inside. Once the box has been opened, the sections cannot be used to treat another patient, even though they are 100 per cent safe.

The organization was forced to find a home outside of her church's attic because of the huge volume of supplies they were collecting. Every Wednesday and Saturday morning, volunteers descend upon H.O.P.E's 40,000-square-foot warehouse to unpack, sort and then repack hundreds of boxes of such supplies.

"It's certainly not a glamorous retirement job or volunteer commitment to be working on," said Maconachie, a retired occupational therapist. "It's dusty and messy, but it's also very satisfying knowing that this would all be wasted, sitting in storage spaces in various hospitals or thrown into the garbage."

Reader said that each year more than 600 boxes of supplies are sent to places like Africa, Mongolia, the Caribbean and Ukraine. In addition, several 40-foot shipping containers full of surplus supplies and equipment, including hospital beds, wheelchairs and walkers, have been sent, and doctors and nurses leaving on medical missions will often pack suitcases of supplies to take with them.

"If you have the energy and the wherewithal, it's a nice way to give back to the rest of humanity who are suffering so

hopelessly and despairing, when we have so much," she said.

If you would like to become a volunteer for International H.O.P.E., please call Maconachie at 774-1102. In addition to warehouse and fundraising volunteers, she said the organization is particularly in need of strong individuals able to do pick-ups of larger equipment. For more information, visit the group online ([www.internationalhope.ca](http://www.internationalhope.ca)).

*If you know a special volunteer who strives to make our community a better place, please contact Erin Madden at [erinmadden@shaw.ca](mailto:erinmadden@shaw.ca). Her column appears Saturdays.*

---

© 2005 Winnipeg Free Press. All Rights Reserved.