

Dikembe Mutombo – Building A Dream for the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) represents in many ways “the perfect epidemiologic storm”. High incidence rates for infectious diseases typically associated with tropical/developing countries (killers such as malaria, diarrheal disease in children, measles, ARI, etc.) persist. Recently, however, chronic and noninfectious diseases such as cancer, hypertension, diabetes, etc. have begun to take an increasing toll on the health of the population as well. The deadly impact of these threats is multiplied by the absence of at time even the most basic preventive or curative health services. Financial barriers limit access to the limited services which do exist for the vast majority of the population.

Thanks to his heart, his vision, his insight and his tireless dedication to making a positive difference in the lives of others, Dikembe Mutombo has leveraged his celebrity as an NBA Hall of Fame basketball super star to become a well-known and much loved spokesman for the underprivileged especially those from in Democratic Republic of Congo and Africa. During his 18 year NBA career, his specialty was defense and blocking shots but in his current career/stage in life he has switched from defense and has embraced the assist as his strategy and statistic of choice! Since leaving the NBA he has become a full time advocate and ambassador for making sure that everyone and especially those most in need have access to the health services and educational and economic opportunities needed to live a better live and see their children grow to be strong healthy productive members of their communities. In his role as UNICEF USA board member, CDC Foundation board member, NBA Global Ambassador, UNICEF Ambassador for Children’s Health. Participant at the Clinton Global Initiative, etc. he has used his celebrity to bring attention to the problems of the needy and the need for collaborative effort to address those problems.

The realization of his dream, the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital (BMMH) provides the DRC, Africa and the world with a model of how his dedication, his own financial resources, his ability to involve and coordinate the efforts of others can create a platform for good and improving the lives of the population of the Masina area of Kinshasa, DRC. The vision for BMMH has been to create a modern institution that would function according to international norms of excellence, and that would serve as a catalyst to train health care providers, do basic research and promote community well-being through outreach and broad collaborations. Academic partnerships both local and from abroad would foster the development of research, education and capacity building in related fields. This is a tall order, but one that is gradually being realized though Mutombo’s support and more importantly his successful efforts to mobilize and focus the resources of diverse stakeholders. BMMH provides a high quality and technically sophisticated clinical setting where other donors, NGOs and interested individuals can collaborate to provide much needed services to the Congolese population.

The hospital has a capacity of 150 beds with dreams and plans to eventually bring it to 300 beds in the future. It is a general hospital with all major services such as internal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, surgery including general surgery and sub-specialties like urology, orthopedics, neurosurgery, otorhinolaryngology (ENT).

The hospital is unique in the DRC for some of the services and amenities that it provides for patients, such as a full meal service, laundry service and a pharmacy for both in-patients and out-patients. These services are often taken for granted in resource rich countries, but where resources are limited, families and patients are expected to bring their own food, sheets and to purchase their medicines (even for hospitalized patients) as well as surgical supplies. At the BMMH, professional nursing services are provided around the clock and there is no need for a family member to be permanently at the bedside to look after the patient except in pediatrics where it is encouraged for emotional support of sick children.

Technologically, the hospital is supported by modern services. Treatment in the fully equipped emergency room with a resuscitation room may be the first step before a patient is admitted to the modern intensive care unit with monitors, ventilators and isolation rooms. The radiology department has a 64-slice CT scanner, one of the first in the country, as well as three ultrasonography machines. This equipment facilitates a quick diagnosis and prevents having to transfer gravely ill patients to facilities outside of the country. In January 2016, Gradian Health Systems installed a new Universal Anesthesia Machine (UAM) at the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital. Gradian, a social venture donated the machine to the hospital for training purposes and to improve the availability of surgical care for the delivery of anesthesia safely and economically.

Several years ago, Becton-Dickinson (BD) funded a center of excellence on Health Workers Safety at the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital. The center is responsible for employee health including monitoring and prevention of work acquired diseases such as hepatitis and tuberculosis, as well as the prevention of needle sticks and the safe disposition of needles and sharp objects.

The hospital has several flagship programs such as its partnership with Opportunity International, a well-known international microfinance organization that opened its first bank in the DRC in the neighborhood of Masina, a few blocks from the hospital. As part of that collaboration, the staff of Opportunity International has held informational sessions on financial literacy for the staff of the BMMH. Similarly, the medical staff of BMMH has held educational sessions on health topics and hygiene for the clients of the bank. Other expansions to the collaboration are currently under consideration including participation in the Fistula Repair Program.

With funding from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the BMMH has developed a program for the repair of vaginal fistulas for women who are afflicted with this most debilitating condition. The results are very encouraging and represent a life-changing experience for these women who after years of ostracism can go back to their communities and be accepted as full members. Many of these women have been abandoned by their husbands and have limited skills to earn a living to support themselves and their children. Their full recovery requires skill development, social and economic support.

Through the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital, the DMF has established several promising partnerships. The first illustration is the DMF/BMMH partnership with the School of Medicine of the Protestant University of the Congo in Kinshasa.

Through this academic affiliation, medical students from UPC will rotate for their clinical training at BMMH and there will be faculty exchanges and research projects carried out between the two institutions. The purpose here is to foster mutually beneficial and collaborative educational and research efforts between these two institutions.

Capacity building efforts in the area of medical training have been ongoing. Several foreign medical professors have visited the BMMH for short periods and funding is being sought to expand this initiative. The ultimate goal is to make the hospital a model of international collaboration that can be utilized to train medical professionals in the DRC, the US and other countries in a mutually beneficial effort.

Innovation Africa (“IA”) is a non-profit organization that brings Israeli solar technology innovation to African communities. Since its founding in 2008, they have completed 97 solar and agricultural projects in Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal impacting over 720,000 people. In December 2013, Dikembe introduced Ms. Sivan Yaa’ri, Founder of Innovation Africa to the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital and Bu Village just outside of Kinshasa. The following summer, her team installed solar light systems at the Bu village school and medical clinic. IA also replaced fluorescent light bulbs at the hospital with energy-saving LED light bulbs. Dikembe knows that more than two-thirds of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is without electricity and he believes just as African communications bypassed land-lines and moved straight to cell phones that the continent might bypass conventional energy sources in favor of sustainable ones.

The Starkey Hearing Foundation is a U.S. based nonprofit organization that travels the globe delivering the gift of hearing to people in need. Dikembe introduced the Starkey Hearing Foundation to the Congo back in 2013. Since that time, Starkey has been to the Mutombo Hospital at least five times where they screened thousands of hearing impaired and deaf Congolese people and fitted approximately 2,500 of them with new, free hearing aids.

In the summer of 2015, surgical eye specialists from SEE International held its first vision care program at the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital. During the program, SEE International restored the sight (free of charge) of 107 men, women and children who otherwise would have been blind, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Dikembe Mutombo was there to ensure the program’s success and the grateful patients were joyfully singing after their bandages were removed.

All of these collaborative efforts have been nurtured and supported by Mutombo’s advocacy and ability to help us all see the “win” in working together to achieve success their synergy! Mutombo would like to now like to address the growing problem of cervical cancer in the DRC. He is in a unique position to do this thanks to his ability to raise awareness and mobilize resources coupled with the ability to build the capacity to provide high quality clinical care for patients though BMMH. Current estimates indicate that every year in DRC 8,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 4,000 die from the disease. Cervical cancer ranks as the 1st most frequent cancer among women in DRC and is the 2nd most frequent cancer among women between 15 and 44 years of age. Data is not yet available on the HPV burden in the general

population of DR Congo, but there are approximately 21 million females under age 21 in the DRC.

However, in Central Africa, the region Congo, DR belongs to, about 99.99% of women in the general population are estimated to harbor cervical HPV-16/18 infection at a given time and 99.99% of invasive cervical cancers are attributed to HPVs 16 or 18. Simple technologies exist to rapidly and effectively expand screening for this killer in resource poor settings like Kinshasa.

In June 2016, two physicians and three nurses from the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital were sent to Lusaka, Zambia to train under the supervision of Dr. Groesbeck Parham, Founder of the Cervical Cancer Program in Zambia and a Professor of gynecologic oncology in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Each person received a Certificate of Completion at the end of their training.

In July 2016, Dr. Parham launched the first cervical cancer screening program in the Congo at the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital. Approximately, 2,553 women were screened for cervical cancer during that time. Dr. Parham along with his colleague, Dr. Michael Hicks also performed 17 surgeries for Congolese women testing positive for this deadly cancer.

Also in July 2016, another major health initiative took place at the Biamba Marie Mutombo when a team of six female orthopedic surgeons, volunteers with the U.S. based nonprofit organization, Women's Orthopaedist Global Outreach (WOGO) along with 41 of their volunteers traveled to the Congo to perform free knee replacement surgeries at the hospital. The WOGO team completed a total of 42 knee replacements in 4 days of surgeries. There are 42 new knees in the Congo, the first ever knee replacements performed in the entire country (pop. 77 million). The Biamba Marie Mutombo hospital and WOGO teams worked together beautifully. The patients are doing amazing, walking around and feeling great. WOGO also completed a day-long educational symposium at the hospital with students, residents, doctors and nurses from the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital, the University of Kinshasa and surrounding medical locations. It was filled with wonderful dialogue and questions. WOGO's vision is to transform lives in under-served global communities by reducing the chronic burden of arthritis and disability through total joint reconstruction and to leave the communities they visit healthier, more knowledgeable and inspired to reach beyond prior limits.