

# BUSINESS

## Haitian hospital gets assist from area doctors



This was the operating room in the Port-au-Prince hospital that a local doctor saw in August 2004 after the looting.

Photo by Dr. Albert La Torra

# \$750,000 of medical supplies en route

By STEPHANIE HORVATH  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

The looters that swarmed through the Haitian hospital were so thorough they even ripped the plug off the cord of the only lamp in the operating room.

Taking advantage of the chaos created by a fallen government, they also stole mattresses, beds, doors, medical equipment, sinks, toilets, and an air-conditioning unit. The Port-au-Prince hospital was stripped of almost everything of value. The looters sold their booty on the black market. What was left was outdated, at least as old as the 38-year-old hospital itself.

That was how Dr. Wilhelm Larsen, a semi-retired oncologist in West Palm Beach, found the hospital when he visited his native Haiti in April 2004. His brother Dr. Alex Larsen, a cardiologist, had just been named the hospital's medical director. Doctors at the ravaged hospital affiliated with the University of Haiti's medical school are struggling to treat patients.

Larsen returned to West Palm Beach, and he and Dr. Albert La Torra, the director of Columbia Hospital's wound care clinic, collected used medical equipment from

Columbia Hospital. This week a barge containing \$750,000 worth of equipment left Miami for the Port-au-Prince hospital. The two doctors are flying to Haiti next weekend to help unload and set up everything from mammogram machines to IV poles to an electric typewriter.

"It's purely humanitarian," La Torra said this week. He has set up the nonprofit La Torra Larsen Medical Foundation to pay for the project and plans to collect and send at least two more loads of donated medical equipment.

The first shipment, donated by HCA-owned Columbia Hospital, included two sonogram machines and eight cardiac monitors. La Torra said the mammogram machines will be the only ones of their kind in Haiti.

Eric Goldman, Columbia's chief operating officer, said the donated equipment was slated to either be sold to a remanufacturing company or scrapped as junk.

"He (La Torra) told us how health care facilities didn't have things as simple as doors on all the rooms," Goldman said. "It was nice for the hospital because we're able to see first hand who it's helping."

Goldman said JFK Medical Center and Palms West Hospital, the two other HCA hospitals in Palm Beach County, also plan to donate equipment to the doctors' cause.

The medical equipment will arrive in a country known for its instability. Haiti's latest unrest began in December 2003 with protests against Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the country's first democratically elected president. He was later thrown out by the Haitian army, reinstated by the United States and eventually fled to exile in South Africa in February 2004.

The chaotic environment has hit public health care the hardest, said Dr. Jean Pape, a professor of medicine at Cornell University's Weill

See HOSPITAL, 8D ►



**Larsen:** A native of Haiti, he gathered equipment to aid homeland.



**La Torra:** He set up a nonprofit to pay for the project.

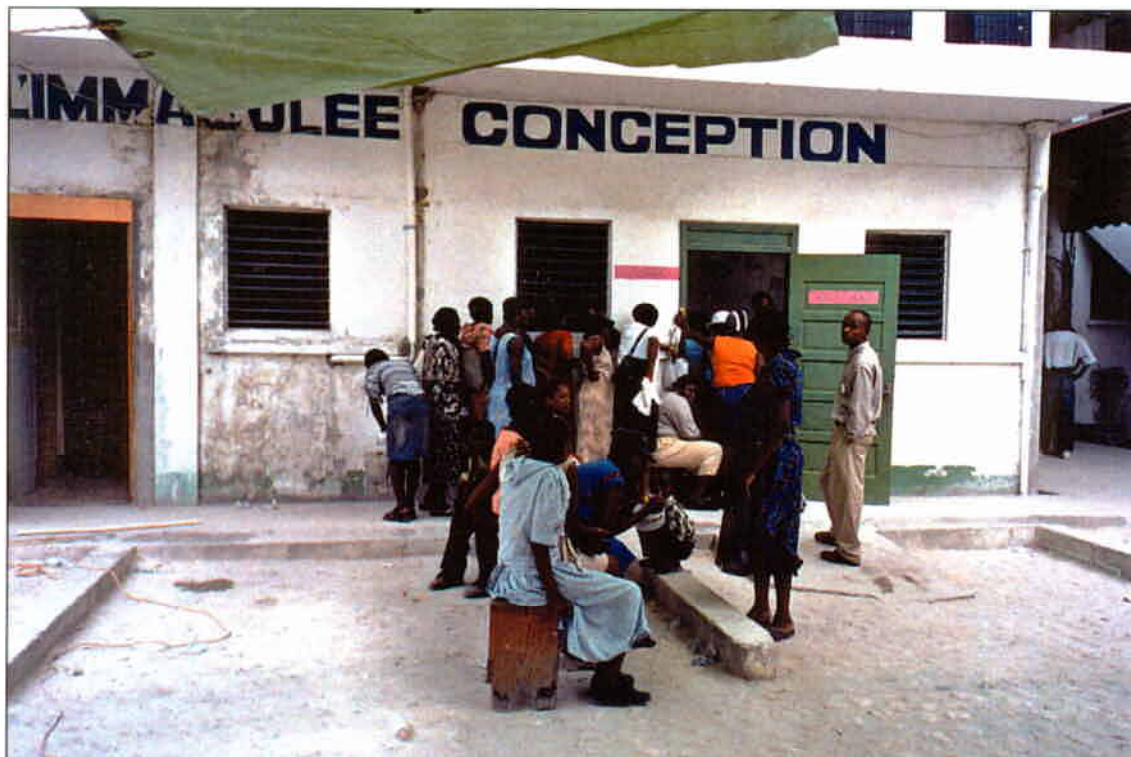


Photo by Dr. Albert La Torre

Haitians lined up at the Port-au-Prince hospital for medicine in August 2004. Medical help is scarce in most parts of Haiti.

## Group also plans to bring doctors

### ► HOSPITAL from 1D

Medical College and the founder and director of Les Centres GHESKIO, a nonprofit clinic in Port-au-Prince. He said in Haiti health care is provided by public, nonprofit and for-profits hospitals and clinics. The nation's three most deadly medical conditions are HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and respiratory infections.

Ford Eloge, a Haitian native and a reporter for two Haitian radio stations in Palm Beach County, said it's hard for Haitians to get medicines. He also said people in the Haitian countryside have to walk miles to reach a medical clinic and instead many rely on remedies made from plants to heal themselves. Pape said there's one doctor for every 10,000 people; in some remote areas, there's only 1 doctor per 50,000 people.

Eloge doubted whether the shipment of medical supplies from Columbia

Hospital would make a lasting difference at the Office D'Assurance Accidents Du Travail Maladie Et Mater-nite hospital.

"To me, it's temporary because of the lack of a good system. We have corruption in Haiti. You can bring a medical tool today and tomorrow it is up here," he said, referring to people who sell stolen goods on the black market.

But Pape said the equipment would be helpful as long as there is a way to repair it as needed.

"If the hospital has good community support they have nothing to fear," Pape said in an e-mail to *The Palm Beach Post*. "We have never lost a pencil in 25 years and we have no armed security."

Larsen and La Torre realize that violence and looters might upend their plans. But the two friends — who have talked for more than 20 years about how to create a health care system in Haiti — think that the time is right to act.

With Larsen's brother leading the hospital, they say they aren't worried about corruption. And the doctors point to the elections scheduled for October and November as a chance for the nation to create a democratic government.

Their other plans include building clinics in Haiti's villages and staffing them with local doctors and nurses as well as trained residents. They also want to bring U.S. doctors to Haiti to teach and ask pharmaceutical companies to donate drugs. They want to build a new medical and nursing school. La Torre said they plan to start raising money for these projects through their foundation.

"We're getting old. We have to take a chance. In 10 years, I don't want to say, I wish," Larsen said. "Haiti has the best chance to become stable that it's ever had."

• stephanie\_horvath@pbpost.com

### Medical supplies

Dr. Wilhelm Larsen and Dr. Albert La Torre collected medical equipment donated by Columbia Hospital and are shipping it to a hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The shipment includes:

- two mammogram machines
- four gynecologic exam tables
- eight cardiac monitors
- two sonogram machines
- one electric typewriter
- 20 IV poles
- one pediatric scale
- one wheelchair