

## St. Francis Hospital's medical missions change lives

By Jack Sheedy  
News Editor

HARTFORD – Dr. Michael Bourque's first medical mission to the Dominican Republic in 2006 seemed to get off to a great start. He had been an obstetrician/gynecologist at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center for about 30 years. As part of the hospital's mission team of medical professionals, he was confident that he could hit the ground running and make a difference in the lives of an incredibly impoverished nation.

He did. But not before he learned a gut-wrenching lesson.

"It really began for me with this young lady here, who was 24 years old," he said, showing a photograph of a healthy, smiling woman lying in a recovery room with her newborn son. "It was the first day of our first mission in a desert area of the Dominican Republic, and she needed a C-section."

Dr. Bourque and his team performed a successful cesarean and went back to their camp feeling good about it. They had been in country for only a couple of hours and had already performed this essential operation that the woman was not able to obtain any other way. Dr. Bourque had signed her out and put her in the hands of local nurses who wore white and seemed to understand what kind of aftercare to administer.

"The next morning," Dr. Bourque said, "we came in and found that she had died."

It was a devastating blow to Dr. Bourque and the team. "I had never lost a mother, ever, and here I lost one under my nose, not even knowing about it," he said. "It just kind of showed me how ignorant I was about what the world medicine

climate is. I had seen the world through U.S. eyes."

The nurses who had been assigned to care for the woman had had about two weeks of training, mostly in how to clean up. When the woman died of a stroke while breastfeeding her newborn baby, no nurses were even in the room.

At the inquest, Dr. Bourque was congratulated for saving the baby. "They lose mothers all the time," he said.

The hospital's International Medical Mission (IMM) was created in 2001 by Dr. Ibrahim Daoud, a general and laparoscopic surgeon who has been with St. Francis since 1972. After Dr. Bourque joined that team in 2006, he created his own team. Dr. Daoud's team is now called the "red" team and Dr. Bourque heads the "blue" team, which now includes seven members of his family.

All participants on both teams pay their own air fares and use personal vacation time on the trips, which are coordinated by Medical Ministry International (MMI), a Texas-based Christian organization that arranges medical missions around the world. The hospital provides medicine and supplies, but Dr. Bourque said that donations are welcome to help with expenses that average about \$1,500 per volunteer.

After his 2006 experience, Dr. Bourque came upon a stone wall while walking in the woods and reflected that each person can be thought of as a stone making up that wall, a participant in something bigger than he or she is. He approached Sister Judith Carey, director of mission integration at St. Francis, and asked if he could form his own team. He is



**'WE MADE A DIFFERENCE'** – Kathy Aries, a labor delivery nurse at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, joins Dr. Michael Bourque, an obstetrician/gynecologist at the hospital, to talk about their medical missions in the Dominican Republic. In recruiting volunteers to join his team, Dr. Bourque uses the slogan: "See the world. Make a difference. Change your life." (Photo by Jack Sheedy)

now working on putting together a Web site to recruit others, with the slogan: "See the world. Make a difference. Change your life."

"Blessings come back to you so much better that I just can't explain it to you until you've been. You can't believe what happens to you," he said.

In 2009, Dr. Bourque was named a Healthcare Hero by the Connecticut Hospital Association for his work as organizer of IMM.

Kathy Aries, a labor delivery nurse at St. Francis who has accompanied Dr. Bourque on five missions, said she collects thousands of pounds of medical items from the hospital over the course of a year. She assigns each volunteer a 50-pound bag that may include sutures, gloves, gowns, IV tubing, surgical instruments and more.

"This is the operating room," she said, showing a photograph of a padlocked door. "The doors are locked. This is the surgical and delivery ward. There's nobody in there to help you."

In fact, until the team arrives, the hospital is an empty shell. There are signs on the doors, but, as Dr. Bourque puts it, "There's no magic inside." The team brings the magic.

Mrs. Aries said, "This hospital had one running faucet, under lock and key, and the guy who got water out of it showed me the basin of water. It had mosquito larvae swimming in it."

She puts Cidex in the water to kill everything in it before she can sterilize instruments.

"There were two ambulances outside the hospital," Dr. Bourque said. "They had four flat tires each."

Mrs. Aries said that a table the size of a small end table must be used to hold 30 or 40 surgical instruments during an operation. Two operations take place simultaneously in the same small room, separated by a paper sheet.

"Everybody holds flashlights, because sometimes you'll be doing an operation and the lights go out," Dr. Bourque said. "We happened to deliver a baby in the dark."

He said that comparing the operating rooms to those depicted on episodes of "M\*A\*S\*H" is not an exaggeration.

Mrs. Aries feels a spiritual presence when she works on the mission. She and her team of nurses were once desperately trying to save a newborn baby who was not breathing when a doctor from another group joined them.

"She came over and started praying, and that kid just – it was like the kid had a jolt. I'm telling you, there is so much that we don't understand," she said.

Recently, Dr. Bourque received a photograph of the boy whose mother died after her cesarean delivery. "He is now four years old," he said. "The MMI people have adopted him and are supporting him through some donations, so he's getting care and enough medicine. We made a difference in this little man's life, so some day I hope to meet him again."

The teams are looking for medical and nonmedical volunteers for their trips to Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

For information on volunteering, or to make a donation, write to: St. Francis Medical Missions, c/o St. Francis Hospital Foundation, 95 Woodland St., Hartford, CT 06105.