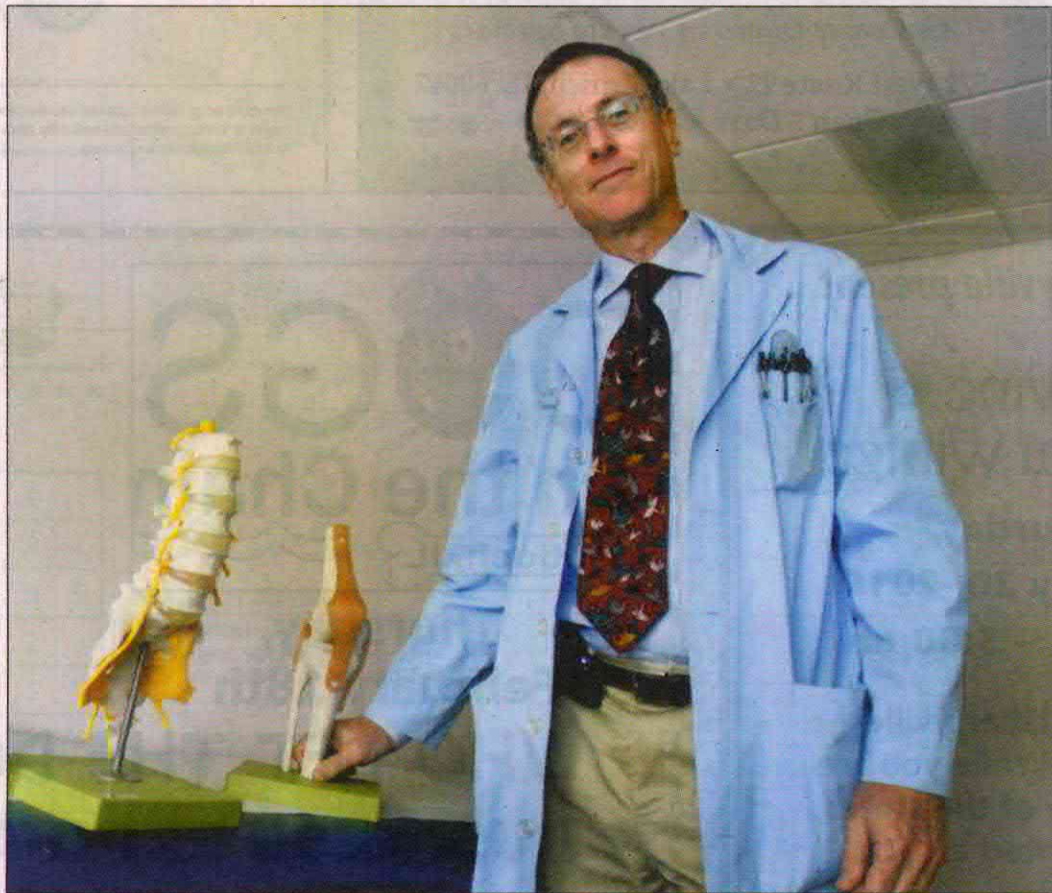


'This was pure medicine'

Local doctor returns from Haiti with unforgettable memories



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Orthopedic surgeon Dr. Michael Jacker spent a week in Haiti treating victims of the earthquake. He's on staff at Advocate Condell Medical Center and Lake Forest and Northwest Community hospitals.

BY VINCENT PIERRI

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A North Shore doctor who treated victims of the Haitian earthquake said the experience was both exhilarating and humbling.

Comparing his work in Haiti to battlefield surgery, orthopedic surgeon Dr. Michael Jacker has returned home with a sense of hope for those he helped, and a sense of sadness for those he couldn't.

On staff at Advocate Condell Medical Center and Lake Forest and Northwest Community hospitals, Jacker recently returned from a seven-day volunteer stint in Port-au-Prince.

"When I heard the first radio reports, I knew immediately there would be a huge number of fracture and crush injuries," said Jacker, 56. "I wanted to be there to help."

He searched the Web for relief agencies, eventually finding California-based Airline Ambassadors International. Airline Ambassadors began in 1992 as a network of airline employees using their travel privileges to take trips

for humanitarian projects.

Not knowing when he might return, Jacker packed plenty of clothes, a water filtration kit, mosquito net and protein bars. He flew out of O'Hare Airport at 2:30 a.m. Jan. 29.

"It was a powerful moment for me," Jacker said. "I knew I had to do this."

Arriving in Port-au-Prince, he made his way to a private hospital that withstood the force of the quake. Hospital staff fled in the early days of the disaster and the place was being run by French and American medical teams.

Hundreds of injured were arriving daily.

"The most common injuries were open fractures with exposed bones. Many were infected, and since the injuries were nearly three weeks old, the muscles were starting to atrophy," Jacker said. "I saw things I've only read about in textbooks."

Many of the arrivals had to be turned away.

"If they had hip fractures, we couldn't do anything for

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Doctor: Medic couldn't help everyone

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them. We just didn't have the right hardware."

In practice for 25 years, the Harvard University and Rush Medical Center of Chicago graduate has extensive experience in emergency trauma treatment. Fluent in French, Jacker said his language skills served him well in Haiti.

Jacker treated dozens of people, many of them children. Some of the treatment involved undoing the work done by other doctors.

"They did the best they could in the first days after the quake, but many of the casts and splints were applied in the wrong ways and needed to be changed," Jacker said.

Lacking recovery rooms, patients were put in tents in the hospital's courtyard.

The scene in Port-au-Prince was an assault on the senses, the Highland Park man said.

"The air was dusty, the odor from sewage, garbage and the tens of thousands of corpses still trapped in the rubble was overwhelming," he said. "The crushed buildings and the tent camps were everywhere."

Jacker didn't witness any violence during his weeklong stay. The people still seemed to be in shock.

"They had a vacant look in their eyes. I saw no smiles. They looked as if they were living through a nightmare. Their tents were mostly worthless, bed sheets held up by sticks.

I can't imagine what it will be like when the rainy season comes soon."

Jacker said being a doctor in that situation was unlike anything he's experienced in the states.

"This was pure medicine," he said. "No insurance forms, no malpractice worries, no paperwork. It was completely rewarding. I never felt tired, never felt exhausted."



• *Vince Pierri's column appears every other Wednesday. He can be reached at vpierri@dailyherald.com.*