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## The Last Mile

The fight against the HIV epidemic is a journey. Every woman and child we treat, every clinic we open, every healthcare worker we train...these are all steps along the way. As we take these steps, we are increasingly conscious of the importance of going the last mile. In the journey towards preventing HIV infection, we cannot stop short. We must commit ourselves to traveling to the end of the road.

This commitment especially rang true in 2007, when we spent twenty four heartbreaking, yet ultimately, inspiring hours traveling along the muddy road from the city of Goma to Lake Edward, which spans the borders of Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. We traveled at the request of Dr. William Bonane, accompanied by a Congolese nurse Joseph Ciza and four Congolese doctors; we embarked on a voyage to visit some of the most remote hospitals and clinics.

Our purpose was to identify whether we might open HIV prevention and care programs in this particularly rural area. This was no easy task, and one that admittedly aroused some initial hesitation. This region of eastern Congo has been ravaged by both man and nature. It became home to fleeing rebels following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and was further devastated by the violent eruption of the Mt. Nyiragongo volcano in 2002. The villages that had not been burnt to the ground were left in a state of insecurity, and thus we knew that our passage would be dangerous. But it was for this very reason that we knew we must make the journey. With other organizations pulling out their aid programs and leaving this region on the brink of total abandonment, we knew that we had to go further – to travel the last mile, meet the end of the road, where others would not tread.

We set out from Goma early in the morning, and as we made our way into Virunga National Park and farther away from the city, other organizations' reasons for pulling out their relief programs became evident. We saw more and more armed rebels along the side of the road, and the charred remains of villages. But we pressed on, determined to reach the five clinics we were scheduled to visit, to meet with their doctors and learn about their needs. At many clinics, the medical records had been destroyed by rebels, and most clinics had barely any medicine at their disposal. At one clinic, a doctor revealed they had no money to pay their four healthcare workers' salaries, and asked for our financial assistance. After a pause, we asked how much this might cost. We were shocked - \$360 per year would pay for each nurse, a stark reminder of how much assistance we can provide at such a seemingly small expense.

Completing our clinic visits, we drove back down the long road to Goma, a heavy silence as we contemplated everything we had witnessed, all that we had learned. As we drove, we passed hundreds of women and children marching along the road, staying ahead of the rebels as they moved from village to village. We couldn't help but wonder why more people weren't simply abandoning the

region and moving to a safer area. But the fact remains that despite the trials they had faced and hardships they suffered, to many in eastern Congo, this was still their home. The Congolese people were not going to abandon this region. Neither were we.

Four years have passed since that journey. Since that time, we have identified 16 clinics along that road to Lake Edward and have opened PMTCT programs at each. Under the leadership of Dr. William Bonane, healthcare workers are trained to provide life-saving HIV testing and treatment to the women and children who visit these clinics.

Word of these programs has spread – an encouraging reminder that difficult work can be carried out in places which once seemed lost and abandoned. We are encouraged by this progress and have completed a similar tour of clinics in South Kivu, where, under the leadership of Dr. Givano Kashemwa, we now support 40 clinics, providing assistance to their eagerly awaiting doctors.

Over the course of that 24-hour journey with Joseph, by traveling those final miles up the road to Lake Edward, we took the extra steps to reach a region in danger of being forgotten.



Images from that journey remain crystal-clear in my mind to this day, and they sometimes rise to the surface and pass briefly before my eyes, like slides rotating through a projector. A hospital, with a sign prominently displayed at the gate prohibiting automatic rifles inside. The faces of HIV-infected women in a poor fishing village, left with no choice but to trade their bodies in exchange for food and money from itinerant fisherman. A young nurse patiently waiting for our arrival, her handwritten records spread meticulously on the table in front of her. Clouds of dust trailing behind our four-wheel-drive ambulance, particles swirling in the wind as darkness fell over the expansive African plains. Eating dinner by candlelight in the Catholic monastery that harbored us for the night.

At a time when many organizations are stopping short and pulling back, Global Strategies for HIV Prevention remains committed. It is with your continued support that we are able to go the extra mile, and take the fight against HIV infection even to the end of the road.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Arthur J Ammann, MD

Arthur J Ammann, MD