



# PURSUING GLOBAL HEALTH IN ECUADOR

BY THOMAS K. COMFORT, MD



*Dr. Eckehart Wolf, a German surgeon and Christian missionary, has spent more than 25 years serving the people of Ecuador through HCJB Global. Eckehart and his wife, Claudia, are based in Shell, Ecuador, at the Hospital Vozandes del Oriente (HVO) where Eckehart serves as the medical director and head of surgical services.*



*In 2009, Dr. Wolf invited Thomas Comfort, M.D., and Abby Jeffrey, PA-C, both of St. Croix Orthopaedics, to HVO to help develop a joint replacement program. The following is a recap of their time in Shell, as told by Dr. Comfort.*

For several years, the desire to pursue medical mission service had grown in me. Then, six years ago, encouraged by my St. Croix Orthopaedics partner's mission efforts and by members of my church, an opportunity arose for me to work as an orthopaedic surgeon in Hospital Vozandes-Quito, Ecuador. At that time, I joined a team of Gillette Children's Hospital surgeons, led by Dr. James Gage, who were traveling to Ecuador to help care for children with cerebral palsy and hip deformities. It was on this first trip that I met Dr. Eckehart Wolf, the Hospital's medical director and head of surgical services.

After having worked with Dr. Wolf, during several additional mission trips to Quito, he asked me if I would consider performing joint replacement surgeries at the hospital in Shell. Over the years, Dr. Wolf had noticed an increasing number of working-age patients with severe hip arthritis suitable for hip replacement, but he was unable to offer any surgical help. These



surgeries were routinely being performed at the HCJB hospital in Quito but the private practice surgeons were charging \$6000.00 per case. In a country where health insurance is virtually nonexistent and monthly wages range from \$400.00 to \$600.00, most patients were unable to afford the procedure. Even with HCJB's offer to underwrite most of the cost, the procedures were too expensive for most to afford.

## Mission 2009...

In 2009, after many months of planning and arranging for medical equipment and supplies to be sent to Shell, Abby Jeffrey PA-C (and interpreter) and I arrived on a Saturday evening in Quito, a city of two million inhabitants nestled on a plateau at 9,000 feet between the east and west cordillera of the Andes mountain range. The following day, we made the five-hour drive down to Shell, traveling the Pan American Highway or "Avenue of the Volcanoes" to the edge of the Amazon Jungle.

On our first day in Shell, we held an all-day clinic, examining many patients with severe hip arthritis. Although there were many candidates who would have benefited from surgery, only some were able to pursue treatment.

On Tuesday and Thursday, Abby, Dr. Wolf, a representative from the equipment company and I scrubbed for the surgical cases. Although some improvisation was required— such as constructing a hip holder from a Balfour retractor— the procedures went well with no major complications and all patients were doing well at last follow-up.

We returned to Quito Friday afternoon to take a tram to the 13,500 foot peak of the recently active Pichincha Volcano to enjoy the spectacular view of the Quito valley. On Saturday, March 14th, we returned home exhausted but exhilarated; already looking forward to returning for more service to this high need area.

## Mission 2010...

I returned to Ecuador in 2010 to perform additional hip replacement procedures as well as the first arthroscopy in the Pastaza region. It has been a tremendous pleasure to work with such dedicated individuals and to see their efforts rewarded through appreciation from their patients. I hope to be able to continue to serve in this way for years to come.



## HCJB Global Hands-Healthcare

is a global medical mission organization that runs three medical facilities in Ecuador, South America:

- Vozandes Clinics' mission is to bring affordable, Christian-centered healthcare, primarily to poor people in Quito and other cities of Ecuador. Medical staff saw 51,620 patients in 2008. Vozandes Clinics are managed by graduates of the family practice residency program at Hospital Vozandes-Quito. Specialists, such as Thomas Comfort, M.D., St. Croix Orthopaedics orthopaedic surgeon, also see patients in the clinics.
- Hospital Vozandes-Quito in Quito, Ecuador, is the largest and considered to be one of the best hospitals in Ecuador. It has 76 beds and, according to its website, it served nearly 197,000 patients in 2008.
- Hospital Vozandes del Oriente (HVO) in Shell, Ecuador, is a 30 bed hospital specifically built to serve the indigenous peoples living within the 6,000 square miles of roadless jungle to the east. In 2008, it served more than 23,000 patients.