

## Alternative opportunities in medicine

# Volunteer health tours can be gratifying

By Laura Buterbaugh

If you're itching to travel and you have a community-service bent, Dr. Emmanuel Tuffuor has a job for you.

Growing up in Ghana, Africa, he witnessed the dire lack of health care and a sky-high infant-mortality rate. When he finished his medical training in the United States, he returned to his homeland and started a clinic that is staffed partially by volunteer doctors, nurses and other health-care providers.

Dr. Tuffuor is seeking U.S. generalists and specialists to volunteer in the clinic, both treating patients and training local "village health workers" to provide care throughout their country.

"There is so much that is needed in Africa. Hopefully we can introduce some basic but effective care," said Dr. Tuffuor, an internist in Cleveland who spends four months a year in Ghana.

"We're trying to make a difference in what exists there. Although we emphasize general medicine, what will set us apart is being able to offer specialized care," he said.

Dr. Tuffuor's program is one of several that offer volunteer practice opportunities overseas. Volunteers work in areas that have shortages of physicians and equipment, providing care and training local staff to continue the care once the vol-

The American Refugee Committee needs physicians to work one-year stints in refugee communities in Thailand, Cambodia and Malawi. The committee hires four to five doctors a year who have a degree in public health and some experience in working in developing countries or rural areas.

In most cases, the group pays doctors \$1,500 per month and provides group housing, transportation, health insurance and travel costs. It also recruits volunteer nurses and physical and occupational therapists.

Dr. Louis Braile, an FP in Belfair, Wash., has served nine "tours" with the refugee committee, traveling to the Thai-Cambodian border to work at a Khmer refugee camp.

Back home, he works part time for an HMO.

"It takes a little bit of adjusting," he said. "But one has to accept the fact that this is the reality of life here.

X-rays are rarely available. Fancy lab studies are not always available."

Dr. Braile has taught local workers there to do minor surgical procedures and treat everything from colds to malnutrition—an all-too-common ailment, he said.

"I got out of it a great feeling of accomplishing something. Many of the Khmers are so grateful, and you can't help but feel good about that."

Orthopedic surgeon Dr. Robert McConnell has taken eight trips with Health Volunteers Overseas, which



Developing countries, such as Cambodia, have dearth of health care.

tries to train doctors there in fields such as anesthesiology and general, orthopedic and oral surgery.

"We teach basic things, such as deciding which patients to do surgery on, and basic surgery including how to handle tissues and bones," he said.

"It was hard at first to go from our style of orthopedics to their style," Dr. McConnell said. "You have to use what they have. If they don't have X-rays in the operating room, you do what our grandfathers did: put in pins, feel the bone, visualize in your mind where the bone is."

HVO sends about 150 volunteers a year to Bangladesh, Ethiopia,

Mozambique, St. Lucia and Uganda. Most volunteers serve for at least one month.

Doctors are responsible for their transportation costs, but in most sites housing and often food is provided. "I like to travel, the work is challenging and I feel good about myself when I do it," Dr. McConnell said. "I get paid a lot of money here, and I'd like to give something back."

Doctors interested in volunteering overseas can call Dr. Tuffuor at (216) 541-3600, the American Refugee Committee at (612) 872-7060, and Health Volunteers Over-

SHAWN HENRY/SABA