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Local doctor helps treat victims of tsunami in southern India

By JACK SHAUM

Staff Writer

February 18, 2005

STEVENSVILLE — Having spent time in India during his pre-medical school days, Dr. James Chamberlain was familiar with conditions in some of the more remote areas of the country. But when he arrived there last month to help out in the aftermath of the post-Christmas tsunami, he was taken aback.

“I didn’t grasp the magnitude of the damage or the human toll,” he recalled. “The one thing that sticks in my mind is women sitting all day in the rubble that had been their huts. It haunts me, the look on their faces.”

Chamberlain, a family care doctor with Maryland Primary Care Physicians in Stevensville, said as he watched and read the coverage of the tsunami, he “couldn’t shake the idea of going.” Prior to medical school, he spent six months in India working with a Jesuit school and developed an affinity for the area. So he contacted people he had worked with in India through the Catholic Health Association of India and told them he was interested in offering assistance.

“It took about a week between the time I started to get ready and the time I left on Jan. 11,” said Chamberlain, who lives in Arnold. “My wife, who’s a nurse, would’ve also liked to go.”

After a long and arduous trip that involved several airplanes, Jeeps, and buses, he arrived in the coastal city of Nagapattinum on the Bay of Bengal in Tamil Nadu, India’s southernmost state, north of Sri Lanka and immediately went to work.

“I joined a team of people — there were four teams — to go out into the villages,” Chamberlain explained. “We set up mobile clinics under a tree or whatever was there. It was a great team of people. On the first day, I saw 75 patients and after that, it was about 100 patients a day.”

The normal workday was 9 a.m. to about 7 p.m. with a break part-way through the day. Then

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Dr. James Chamberlain, right, examines children who were victims of the recent tsunami. Chamberlain, who has a practice in Stevensville, recently spent two weeks in the disaster area, offering aid.

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the teams would hold meetings from 8:30 to 10 p.m. before finally calling it a day. During the two weeks he was in India, he was able to take only one day off. He said he and the other doctors lived in a retreat house behind a large Roman Catholic cathedral that was on higher ground and was spared.

Chamberlain was the only American on the medical teams in his area, but since his colleagues all spoke English, language was not a problem. They helped translate for him when he was working with local patients who did not speak English. He did, however, encounter an American medical student and an American journalist during his time there.

During his travels to the various Indian villages, he saw a wide variety of suffering. There were serious infections as the result of injuries sustained during and after the tsunami; there were patients suffering from depression and anxiety; and there were respiratory infections in children and adults alike. He particularly remembers one man.

“He was lying on the floor with a horrible infection on his foot, and said to us, ‘We call on your God, because our God has failed us,’” Chamberlain recalls. He said that after a difficult drive, the team succeeded in getting him to a hospital, the closest of which was a considerable distance away by bus.

Chamberlain divides his time between his office in Stevensville and another in Arnold. He sees patients three days a week on Kent Island, and two days a week in Anne Arundel County. When he decided to go to India, he said, he had the full support of the other doctors in the offices — who filled in for him — and Maryland Primary Care Physicians.

“It (the company) stepped up and helped with the plane ticket and made a sizeable donation to the cause, funding it through the group I was working with,” he said. “I want to thank my group for making it possible.”

When it came time to return home after his two-week tour, it was not a simple matter of getting on a plane and flying directly to BWI Airport.

He said the nearest airport was 8r hours away, and buses and Jeeps had to be used to reach it. Then, he was on four different airplanes before arriving back home on Jan. 30. The trip back to the U.S. had taken 52 hours. He had been away 19 days, including the extensive travel time.

Arriving back home on Jan. 30, he took two days off to rest up before returning to his practice. Reflecting on his mission of mercy and the hardships he encountered, Chamberlain didn’t hesitate when the question of going again came up.

“I would go in a heartbeat,” he said. “No question.”

Reader Comments

Send your comments!

From: Marcia Baldwin

Date: 3/2/2005 8:05:37 AM

I've been a patient of Dr. Chamberlain's since my teen years. He's seen me through

everything from the happiest moments to some very sad ones. He's compassionate and caring above and beyond many others in his field. I am not surprised by the praise lauded on him or his caring for others in need. He is indeed an every day hero.

From: David and Marilyn Witt

Date: 3/1/2005 11:30:36 PM

Marcia called about the well deserved laudatory article. You well know the esteem that we all had for you throughout the last 20 years. We wish we were still closer to your offic.

From: Holly Davidson

Date: 2/19/2005 10:34:12 AM

I would like to comment on the wonderful article about Dr.James Chamberlain.

The article brought tears to my eyes and and in my opinon, you will not find a better, more caring and compassinate Dr. as Dr. Chamberlain.

I have been a patient of his since 1990 or more, and I have been very sick off and on. I will be having a portion of my liver removed and Dr. Chamberlain has done everything possible and more in finding me the care that I need.

I can only imagine the wonderful care he gave to the victims of the tsunami treagedy. What a wonderful deed he did!!! I am sure it made him feel really good inside to do what he did!

Thank you Dr. Chamberlain and Maryland Primary Care for being the best Primary facility here on Kent Island!

Sincerely, Holly Davidson
