



## **My Medical Mission Experience –**

### **By Germaine**

This past summer I went home to Cameroon for a volunteer Medical Mission trip with the Patcha Foundation. It was truly a life changing experience for me and the beginning of a career as an aspiring physician!

I was only 6 years old when my father, the bread winner of the family, died in a plane accident. My father's death changed my life forever. Due to financial hardship, we moved into an outskirts neighborhood of Douala, Cameroon where the odor of disease was everywhere. The children were so malnourished that their ribs stuck out like farm ridges on a cornfield. The water was non-potable and people bathed in the river. The houses stunk badly and were infested with cockroaches. The women and children had zero access to any form of health care. In addition, I had lost many friends and family during and after labor. I almost lost my own life to preeclampsia three years ago prior to delivering my first child. It was only after the birth of my son that I was educated about and screened for cervical cancer. The shortage of care and/or access to care in socioeconomically disadvantaged countries such as Cameroon is real. Thanks to the Patcha Foundation we are able to address some of these issues.

For example, this past summer I was assigned to work alongside the cervical cancer team of the Patcha foundation. As a rising 3<sup>rd</sup> year medical student from Howard College of Medicine, I was given the role of educating the patients about cervical and breast cancer; taking full histories; assisting the nurses with the cervical and breast exams as well as working hand in hand with the obgyn physician to consult and treat patients. I really enjoyed doing work with my team in addition to helping the patients. One of the highlights of my experience was a young female around her mid 20-30s who came in for a breast and cervical cancer screen. At first glance it seemed as if she was pregnant. However, during the history taking she disclosed that she was diagnosed with a stomach tumor. Then she added that she may have cancer of the uterus as well. When I finished taking the history, I walked with the patient to the screening rooms to help with her screening. I recall mentioning to the nurse that I thought that the patient had a malignant stomach tumor which had metastasized to the ovaries. According to medical books, such tumors are called krukenberg tumors.

After the patient was screened and was found to be negative for both cervical and breast cancer, she continued to insist that she has some sort of cancer in her reproductive area. I watched as the nurses did their best to explain to the patient that she did not have cervical cancer and that they couldn't see anything in the uterus. I then told the nurses my diagnosis of krukenberg tumor and asked that we make her see a physician as soon as possible. I personally walked this patient from our cervical unit to the surgical unit to get additional help. As we



walked together, I did my best to comfort the patient by telling her that the Patcha foundation team would do all they could to make sure she was okay. I shared with her cancer survival stories to uplift her spirit and encouraged her to not succumb to her condition. I found myself becoming a counselor, and I relished that one-on-one moment. The story with this patient may not have a happy ending but I was pleased when the President of Patcha foundation announced that they would be raising funds to support this young woman. I knew something good would come of out her situation. Her stomach cancer was diagnosed late probably due to lack of quality of care but I am grateful to God that I met her and I was part of a team that could possibly assist her.

From previous experiences and my experience with the Patcha foundation, I have realized that the place where one can really make a difference in caring for adults - specifically women and children - is not usually in the hospital, where patients have often already reached the dramatic end-stage of illness, but rather in the 'everyday' encounters that one may experience while volunteering for a mission trip or the neighborhoods to serve the less privileged.