UCH surgeons, specialists volunteer in Nepal

For Medical Mission, Thanksgiving then Katmandu

By Todd Neff

By the time you read this, a group of top University of Colorado Hospital surgeons and other specialists will be back at work, performing surgeries, consulting with patients and sharing their knowledge with up-and-coming talent.

Join the club, you might be thinking as you return from your all-too-brief Thanksgiving break.

These folks will be a long way from UCH, though – so far away, in fact, that they will be as likely to hear “dhanyabad” as “thank you.”

That’s the Nepalese term for expressing gratitude. Most of the group, led by CU School of Medicine cardiothoracic surgeon Fred Grover, MD, departed from Denver International Airport for Katmandu the day after Thanksgiving, Nov. 23. This trip marks the seventh time since 2000 Grover has metabolized holiday comfort food en route to the mountain kingdom’s capital on a medical mission.

All-star cast. Grover, until recently chair of the Department of Surgery and still an active cardiothoracic surgeon at UCH, is traveling in good company. Among those from the School of Medicine making the trek are MDs David Fullerton, head of the division of cardiothoracic surgery; John Mitchell, chief of general thoracic surgery; pediatric cardiac surgeon David Campbell; breast cancer surgeon Nicole Kounalakis; neurologist Archana Shrestha; and cardiologist Robert Quaife. Perfusionist George Justison also joins the group.

Shrestha has spent more time in Nepal than even Grover, having been born there. Her father came to Minnesota for his PhD studies in archaeology when she was five years old, she explained. She had been thinking about doing a medical mission to her ancestral home when Neurology chairman Kenneth Tyler, MD, mentioned Grover’s plans. She and her husband Patrick Justus, who supervises the neurodiagnostic lab at Denver Health, decided to come along.

It’s a serious commitment, Grover says. All will spend two weeks in Nepal, with the exception of Fullerton and Campbell, who will be there one week each, and everyone’s paying his or her own way.

“It costs you a few bucks to get to and from Nepal,” Grover said.

Lucky seven. Grover made his first trip to Nepal in 2000 as part of a larger mission being undertaken by the Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church on the eve of its 100th anniversary. About 45 members had gone to observe and contribute to a church collaboration with a Nepali businessman to fund a 60-bed pediatric ward and add 20 orthopedic beds to Patan Hospital near Katmandu. They did everything from medical work to volunteering in schools, Grover said.

Grover’s follow-on trips often have been family affairs – with his MD son and daughter-in-law. Fred Jr. is a CU-trained family physician, and his wife Theresa is medical director of the Children’s Hospital Colorado Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

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Nepal, a country of 30 million, has per-capita income roughly one-fourtieth that of the United States. While Grover said he’s always impressed with the dedication and skills of the physicians he works with in Nepal, they lack the supporting infrastructure and tools enjoyed at a place like UCH.

“The reason I think I’ve done it is that we have more in this country than any country’s ever had, and there are still a lot of citizens around the world who suffer from underfunded medical care,” Grover said.

The teaching goes in both directions, too, he added.

“You learn so much about how much people can do with so little, and how hard they’re working for the right reasons,” Grover said.

**Hearts and minds.** This 2012 trip is the biggest medical mission he’s led, he said, and the travelers will be busy. The cardiac experts will spend the first week giving lectures, performing surgeries and making rounds at three Katmandu-area hospitals: Shahid Gangalal National Heart Center, Mannohan Cardiothoracic Vascular and Transplant Center, and Patan Hospital. Grover said a good deal of his work in Nepal has focused on valve replacement and repairs for rheumatic fever patients.

Mitchell, whose conversations with Grover convinced him that the time was right to embark on a medical mission, suspects the region’s problems with drug-resistant tuberculosis will provide ample opportunity to help out in Nepal, he said. In particular, he hopes to share his experience in minimally invasive lung surgery on such patients.

“Just as Grover has presented Nepalese hospitals with replacement valves donated by medical device firms, including Medtronic, Sorin and On-X, Mitchell said he was bringing along stapling instruments used in minimally invasive lung surgery. They were donated by Covidien, which in Mitchell’s estimation went “above and beyond the call of duty” to contribute to the mission.

Meanwhile, Shrestha and her husband will be at the capital’s Annapurna Neurological Institute. Shrestha, an epilepsy specialist, will see patients and also give seminars on seizures to neurosurgeons, neurologists, and primary care physicians.

“They’re interested in, given clinically what seizures look like, how you can localize them to the point where they can start doing something surgically,” Shrestha said. She’ll also be talking about the outpatient management of epilepsy and seizures, she added.

“I think part of it for me is just giving back, because I’m from there,” Shrestha said.

**Hard work.** The first weekend in December, the group will take a 40-minute flight west to Pokhara. There they will be guests at a lodge at a lakeside resort deeded to the Jayanti Memorial Trust, which provides lifesaving heart procedures to those otherwise unable to afford them. They will give talks when they arrive, there’s a big dinner, and then, the next day, Grover and colleagues will see patients at a free clinic. In 2010, some 325 people, many of them ailing, bused or walked in to line up. The last came through at about midnight, Grover said.

“We weren’t going to turn them away,” he said.

The second week in Katmandu they’ll be back at the hospital continuing their medical mission. The two-week visit usually ends with a dinner sponsored by the Jayanti Memorial Trust. In 2010, guests included Nepal’s minister of health and U.S. Ambassador Scott DeLisi and his wife, Grover said.

Grover (left) with a Nepalese colleague and patient in post-op during the 2010 mission.
He knows that when he gets back home, he will feel like he’s gotten more out of it than the Nepalese.

“You’re never quite the same afterwards,” he concluded.

*Medical missionaries in Nepal assess a patient at an outdoor clinic.*