

Rheumatology in Haiti: the UC-Haiti initiative's plan to train Haiti's first teaching rheumatologist

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Dr Rebecca Gordon speaks to Nick Ward, Commissioning Editor, about her involvement in the University of California Haiti Initiative. One objective of this initiative is to enable Haitian doctor Wilciane Clare-Belliot to receive specialized training in Rheumatology at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and help her in establishing Haiti's first teaching rheumatology clinic. Dr Gordon is a practicing rheumatologist at the UCLA Medical Center.



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Q Please tell us a little about yourself & your position at UCLA

I am an assistant clinical professor in the UCLA Division of Rheumatology. I have been on faculty here for about 4.5 years. I am originally from the Chicago area, but moved out to the West Coast for residency. Before medical school, I traveled quite a bit all over the world and in medical school I went on a medical mission to Guatemala. Since then, I have always been interested in international health.

Q What inspired you to specialize in rheumatology practice?

One of my first courses in medical school was immunology, and I was instantly fascinated by the immune system. In medical school and residency, the rheumatologists I worked with were always my favorite mentors, so that had a lot to do with it, as well. It is a challenging field that often requires a lot of thought and creativity, so I never get bored.

Q How did you become involved in this initiative to train a Haitian physician in the field of rheumatology?

One of my colleagues, Dr Ami Ben-Artzi, volunteered in Haiti after the big earthquake. While there, when the Haitian doctors found

out he was a rheumatologist, he was bombarded with questions and asked to see sick patients in the hospital. He subsequently found out there were only two other rheumatologists on the entire island. In addition to this, there was essentially no one with expert training in rheumatology who was seeing patients at the state teaching hospital. And no rheumatologist providing instruction to medical students or residents.

From there, he started working on a plan to educate a Haitian doctor or doctors in the field of rheumatology, with the idea that they could continue to teach rheumatology to Haitian medical students and residents.

I initially planned to be one of the many mentors we hope to recruit to work on the project, but when Dr Ben-Artzi got involved in other projects, I took over as the leader of this project.

Q What are the challenges in treating rheumatic conditions in Haiti?

There are many. There is a distinct lack of education in the field of rheumatology, therefore, many conditions, such as Lupus, Rheumatoid Arthritis and vasculitis go undiagnosed until patients have very advanced disease. This makes these conditions harder to

treat and patients have more long term complications. There is also a lack of diagnostic testing: blood tests, radiologic tests and limited ability to get tissue biopsies. Even when tests are available, many Haitian's cannot afford them. This, again, makes accurate diagnosis of rheumatic conditions very difficult. Similar challenges exist with treatment. Many of the medications used in the treatment of rheumatic diseases are unavailable or unaffordable. Very poor patients, cannot afford to see doctors regularly, and, again, this can lead to delay in diagnosis and treatment. Finally, many rheumatologic conditions are rare and may mimic infections (which are common), this can lead to misdiagnosis and improper treatment. Educating Haitian physicians to recognize these conditions could make a huge difference in these patients' lives.

Q Were you surprised by the success of the crowd-funding effort to finance Dr Belliot's visit to the USA?

I thought we would be able to meet our goal because we had such a great team working hard to get the word out, but I was really moved at how generous everyone was. When I saw the donor list, I saw some of my patients have donated, and that really meant a lot to have their support!

Q Please tell us more about the training Dr Belliot will receive in the USA

In August 2014, Dr Belliot spent about 5 weeks with us at UCLA. She spent most of her time seeing patients in the clinic, but also went to the same lectures as our UCLA rheumatology fellows. She had the chance to work with many of the excellent rheumatologists at UCLA and learned the fundamentals of evaluating patients with rheumatologic conditions. She got to observe many different joint injections and has been able to apply these skills to the patients she is treating back in Haiti.

Q How is the project progressing at this stage?

Slowly but surely! There are lots of challenges in getting an international project off the ground and dealing with bureaucracy in Haiti and at UCLA, but we are very close to opening our clinic. In the meantime, Dr Belliot has had a regular stream of rheumatology patients referred to her. She has also given lectures to internal medicine residents, so she is already passing on her knowledge!

Q One of the aims of the project is to open a rheumatology clinic in Haiti – how will this be achieved?

We were lucky enough to get a grant from the International League Against Rheumatism (ILAR). With

this money, we are able to cover the costs of establishing a clinic at HUEH – the state teaching hospital in Port-au Prince. Dr Belliot did her residency there, so she has close ties with this medical community and will have a steady stream of referrals to the clinic. We will also have residents and medical students at the clinic with the aim of educating as many Haitian doctors as possible. We hope to recruit as many rheumatologists from the UC system as possible to serve as mentors for the clinic. We hope to get as many mentors to Haiti as we can, but some may teach 'remotely'.

Q Will there be more Haitian physicians following in Dr Belliot's footsteps & training at UCLA in the coming years?

I certainly hope so! I hope UCLA will continue to be involved with keeping the clinic going, but our main goal is to have Haitian doctors teaching rheumatology to other Haitian doctors, in Haiti!

Q In the long-term how do you see the project benefiting the Haitian health system?

If patients with rheumatic disease can be diagnosed and treated at earlier stages in their conditions, this will hopefully lead better outcomes as well as lower healthcare costs. With greater awareness of rheumatologist diseases, hopefully there will follow greater availability of diagnostic testing and treatment options, as well.

Q Do you plan on visiting Haiti to witness the project first hand?

I had my first visit to Haiti last May. I had the opportunity to meet many of the dedicated physicians working at HUEH and got to give a lecture to the residents. I plan to get back there as soon as possible after the clinic opens!

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