

Education and the sharing of knowledge are the fundamental objectives of *The Vargas International Hand Therapy Teaching Award* offered by AAHS. As the 2015 recipient of the award, I was able to help fulfill these objectives during my 2 week visit to **Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital (KATH)** in Ghana.

With the generous support of AAHS's Vargas Award funds and guidance from the Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO) staff, the planning and coordinating phase of the trip began in the later part of 2014. The trip was then successfully completed in October 2015. My visit was set as a follow-up to an initial site assessment of KATH completed the year before by volunteer hand therapists Gayle Serverance MS, OTR/L, CHT (*2014 AAHS Vargas Award recipient*) and Heather Wood, OTR/L, CHT. At the conclusion of their visit, the need to help establish a sustainable hand therapy program was determined and HVO's Hand Therapy Ghana project was created.

With the hopes of providing a more dynamic team approach, Dr. Lana Kang, an orthopedic hand surgeon from New York City, and I were able to arrange travel times to visit KATH that were overlapping. Dr. Kang's participation was significant in helping achieve the trip's objectives. Being at KATH at the same time allowed us to simultaneously educate and reinforce new practices and procedures across the local care team (surgeons, residents and physiotherapists). Additionally, we were able to model effective collaboration between the surgeon and therapist.

The focus of my trip was to help continue to educate the local physiotherapists on evaluation and treatment techniques of hand and upper extremity cases. I initially observed that patients were most often referred to therapy from both plastics and orthopedic surgeons and most referrals were secondary to a traumatic event (e.g. MVA, table saw, falls). A majority of patients required surgery and amputations. The age range of patients being referred to therapy was across the lifespan although most were 18-59 years.

In order to help local therapists better understand alternative therapeutic techniques, emphasis was placed on "co-treating" patients. Significant time was spent reviewing the mechanism of injury, the structures involved, neuro-anatomy, surgery performed, treatments and goals. A variety of custom orthoses were fabricated. Local therapists were able to observe the construction and application of these devices.

Although there were several challenging cases, I chose one unique patient to use as a teaching highlight. The individual was a 40 year old male with a partial hand amputation involving the dominant side. The local physiotherapist and I reviewed the importance of addressing and treating such things as phantom pain, ROM of his unaffected joints, decreased functional independence with ADLs and discussing patient's personal therapy goals. The patient worked as a driver of heavy/large trucks and since his accident (8 months) was unable to drive any type of vehicle. The patient hoped to have a prosthetic hand but due to limited resources for upper extremity prosthetics at KATH this was unlikely. As an alternative, we fabricated a custom thermoplastic orthotic that included a thumb post that would help with operating a manual transmission. In its completion, the orthotic allowed the patient to hold/carry a light bag in his affected hand. He was instructed to try and practice shifting gears with the orthotic donned and vehicle stationary. His response was positive and hopeful.



Throughout the 2 week volunteer trip, I had the unique opportunity to directly participate in patient care while working alongside local therapy providers. For hand therapists wishing to volunteer to share their knowledge and experience, the people of KATH and the community they serve would continue to benefit greatly. With the Vargas International Hand Therapy Award offered by AAHS, the Ghana Hand Therapy Program as well as other international missions they support will continue to successfully grow. It was an honor and true pleasure to have been awarded the 2015 Vargas Award. A more detailed summary highlighting this trip as well as information about the Ghana Hand Therapy Program can be found on the Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO) website: <https://hvousa.org/>.