A CONNECTICUT DOCTOR IN AFRICA Part III: The Power of Pathos

Dr. Sohi learns a new way of healing

By Mackenzie Rigg

A scrum of doctors and medical students bends over an emaciated 42-year-old man curled on a mattress on the floor, sandwiched between two hospital beds, his head propped against an unpainted gray cement wall.

The only light comes from the sky, through the wall’s open geometric lattice. A single broken bulb hangs from a nest of exposed wires.

The man is HIV-positive. He’s had a cough, chest pains, headaches and diarrhea for weeks. He has edema; the cavities of his legs are filling with water. A doctor listens to his lungs with a stethoscope. He may have asthma, COPD, lung cancer. There is no treatment plan yet, no diagnosis.

The group — an amalgam of Ugandan doctors and medical students from around the world — moves on to the next patient, one of thousands crammed into Mulago Hospital in Uganda’s capital city of Kampala.

A woman, presumably the patient’s wife, kneels on the ground, a baby bundled in a cloth on her back, and helps him take a sip of water from a plastic cup. Almost immediately, he vomits. None of the other doctors or medical students seem to notice.

Dr. Sohi Ashraf does.

Dr. Sohi looks down at the man, whose bony legs are covered by a tattered white sheet. He keeps looking until they make eye contact.

Dr. Sohi gives him a small smile. Neither says a word.

“I just want him to know he’s not alone.”

In America, Dr. Sohi’s goal is to cure. Here, in a place where death has the upper hand, he’s learning the power of compassion, how the littlest moments of comfort may be the strongest medicine he has to offer.

A touch, a glance, a smile, an ‘It’s okay’ or a ‘Thank you’ spoken in the patient’s native language are his powerful weapons.

Small gestures of respect amid the raw intimacy of the hospital also take on deep meaning. An elderly woman pulls her long dress up above her knees, so Dr. Sohi can examine her tiny legs for signs of weakness. When the exam is finished, Dr. Sohi delicately helps pull the dress back down to her feet.

The doctor is acclimating. The shock and disorientation he felt upon arriving at Mulago have morphed into a new way of delivering care. He is adjusting to a different value system, and developing a different set of tools. He has reset his expectations.

Not far from the man with no bed, a young woman beneath a bright yellow blanket struggles to breathe. A frothy translucent liquid drips from her mouth, creating a small pool on her mattress.

The 27-year-old has been in Mulago for weeks, dropped off and abandoned by her family. She’s dying of HIV and meningitis. When she was brought in, her lips were glued shut with the cheesy white fungus caused by thrush, an opportunistic infection common in people with HIV.

Her loud wheezing attracts the doctors’ attention. They fear she might choke to death on her own vomit.

Dr. Sohi and Dr. Alex Kayongo, a 26-year-old Ugandan, move to her bedside. Dr. Alex dabs the fluid from her mouth and mattress with a piece of white gauze.
Dr. Alex adjusts the feeding tube coming out of her left nostril and re-fastens it to her cheek with a piece of white medical tape. She continues gasping for air. Her eyes flicker open and shut, but she is unresponsive. There is no resistance when doctors lift and move her limp limbs. They order morphine to ease her pain.

The other doctors move on to the next patient. Again, Dr. Sohi does not walk away.

He has tried to get used to the prevalence of death here. But death with such pain? That is unacceptable. He makes a decision. He turns and walks briskly out of the ward and down two flights of stairs, searching for a social worker who can authorize palliative care for the dying woman.

At the end of one dark hallway, he asks a woman sitting at an old wooden desk if she’s a social worker. She says no.

Is there one on the floor, Dr. Sohi asks?

Again, no. But there might be one on the third floor, she says.

He climbs to the floor above, asks another nurse, but to no avail. A female doctor appears and leads him back to the ward where the frantic search began.

Dr. Sohi at last finds the social worker and insists that she come with him to see his patient. She walks to the young woman’s bed, glances at her and walks away without saying a word.

There will be no palliative care.

But to Dr. Sohi’s amazement, a volunteer nurse practitioner from Australia appears at the young woman’s bedside. She hangs a few sheets around the bed so she can clean the woman’s raw red bedsores. She empties the catheter, which is so full of pus and urine that it has backed up into the woman’s body.

She turns the woman over and tucks the bright yellow blanket tightly around the tiny, still body.

“No one should be treated like this,” the woman mumbles.

Dr. Sohi looks at the dying woman.

“Hopefully, she goes today.”

He rejoins the group of doctors and medical students who have moved on to another patient.

The woman’s gasping ceases. Dr. Sohi walks back to check on her one last time.

He looks around the ward at the sea of silent suffering.

“Half of these people are going to die,” he whispers.

Minutes later, an orderly wheels a bed through the crammed ward, bumping into other beds as he makes his way through the maze of patients.

On the bed is a huddled form covered head to toe by a bright yellow blanket. mrigg@newstimes.com

About this series

Each year, the Western Connecticut Health Network – comprising Danbury, New Milford and Norwalk hospitals – sends a group of clinicians to practice medicine in impoverished countries. This is the story of one Connecticut doctor’s journey to Uganda, where his lifelong dream of healing the sickest of the sick will be put to the ultimate challenge.
Intern Dr. Alex Kayongo, left, and Dr. Sohi Ashraf lift a patient who fell from his bed at Mulago Hospital in the capital city of Kampala.
University of Vermont medical student Alexandra Miller holds a patient’s hand.
Dr. Sohi Ashraf examines a patient with severe malaria and pneumonia at St. Stephen's Hospital in the Mperenwe village of Kampala.
Minutes before she dies, a 27-year-old woman is bathed behind a blue sheet, a bright yellow blanket crumpled at her feet.

Dr. Sohi Ashraf gazes at the woman, knowing she is taking her last breaths.