Editorial: Become part of a mission to heal

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A Connecticut Doctor in Africa, the five-part series chronicling the work in Uganda of Dr. Sohi Ashraf, of Norwalk Hospital, and his colleagues, in searing imagery captured the hope and helplessness of medical care in this impoverished country of some 37 million people.

The narrative created through the work of writer Mackenzie Rigg and photographer Tyler Sizemore is a gripping tale of determination on the parts of medical professionals, patients and their families, to beat challenges and care for patients.

Dr. Sohi, as he is called, is a 33-year-old, Iranian-born, third-year medical resident at Norwalk Hospital. Each year, the Western Connecticut Health Network — comprising Danbury, New Milford and Norwalk hospitals — sends clinicians to practice medicine in impoverished countries.

Uganda, where fewer than 20 percent of the 37 million population lives with proper sanitation and the annual median income is 1.3 million shillings — what amounts in the United States to $380 — certainly qualifies.

There is no insurance industry in Uganda. A 19-year-old could die — in a hospital, surrounded by doctors — because the $33 cost of a brain scan would financially devastate his family.

Save for the captured images, the crowded, squalid, primitive conditions of the Mulago national referral hospital in the capital city of Kampala would be indescribable. If these are the conditions in a hospital, imagine the deprivation of the daily life around it.

Perhaps the most telling note: coffin makers, like sidewalk vendors, ply their trade in a bazaar just outside the doors of Mulago Hospital.

Dr. Sohi did not parachute into Uganda to be The Great White Hope; he joined as a temporary comrade in arms with the Ugandan doctors who deal on a day-in, day-out basis with the HIV,
tuberculosis, diabetes and the ranks of diseases that ravage the undeveloped parts of our world.

It is hard to read this series and not say a quiet thanks that we live in a place where we have, among other things, clean hospitals.

Some challenges — eradicating a disease from a continent, say — demand the deep pockets of a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

But you needn’t be a millionaire to make a real difference in a Ugandan’s life.

Your $50 could pay for the brain scan mentioned above, with change to spare for antibiotics, or to go toward a generator to run a refrigeration unit.

Uganda is a world away. Yet not so far that medical professionals from Connecticut go there not only to help, but to learn, and to return as better doctors.

Dr. Sohi’s dream is to develop a protocol for screening, treating and managing diabetes. It’s common here. He is convinced it’s a simple measure that could make a real, life-saving difference in Uganda. He’d like to devise this protocol and take it back to Uganda.

Your $50 could help with that, too.

Want to join the cause? Go to wchn.org/globalhealth