

giving back

Busy doctor volunteers for Canadian Network of International Surgery

# African experience reinforces importance of women's health

In Africa, one in 13 women die during childbirth. Worldwide, five million people die of injury annually (more than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined). The Canadian Network of International Surgery works to reduce those numbers by sending volunteer surgeons to Africa to teach local surgeons how to reduce the death rate. To date, the CNIS has taught more than 7,000 African surgeons with a focus on injury, which the non-profit organization says is largely ignored by international aid agencies. One of those volunteer surgeons is Dr. Jan Christilaw, UBC prof and interim president of B.C. Women's Hospital. An obstetrician/gynecologist, she's travelled to Ethiopia and Kampala, Uganda, where she was instrumental in establishing an obstetrics course. She's one of three Vancouver surgeons who volunteer for CNIS.



**Dr. Jan Christilaw has travelled to Ethiopia and Uganda to teach African surgeons obstetrical skills to reduce the number of women dying during childbirth.** photo Dan Toulgoet

**Why did you start volunteering for CNIS?**

Three years ago, the UBC Department of Obstetrics was approached by CNIS. This was because CNIS wanted to expand its programs, which traditionally have been centred on surgery, to include more obstetrical content. Soon after, I started working on the project.

**You already have a very demanding job at B.C. Women's Hospital. How do you find the time to volunteer?**

No matter how busy we might be, I believe that we must take our responsibility as citizens of the world very seriously. Globally, maternal mortality is a huge problem that

warrants our unwavering attention. If a woman dies in childbirth anywhere in the world I see it as the responsibility of all of us, and we must do whatever we can.

**What are the challenges involved in being a volunteer surgeon?**

CNIS projects work on the premise that we are there to support our colleagues in the host countries. We do not just go somewhere and do surgery, because we feel that creating

long-term effects is more important. Through the CNIS, we have developed very close ties to our colleagues in Africa and in other parts of the world. Our projects are largely based on teaching surgical skills and helping increase capacity in those countries.

**How has CNIS made a difference?**

CNIS has been doing this work now for more than 15 years, and continues to go strong. This longevity has meant that it is seen as an organization that truly has a long-term commitment to global health. I think it has also helped raise the consciousness of many here in Canada about the problems that exist around the world. Canadians are compassionate and caring people, and the more they know about these issues, the better.

**What are the local benefits of your overseas volunteer experience?**

Anyone who has been involved in this work will tell you that it is life changing. It gives you a whole new perspective on life and wealth and fairness, to name just a couple of things. I think I am more grounded as a result of this work, and without a doubt, more committed to women's health on a global level.

*If you know an exceptional individual or organization that gives back, email [fhughes@vancourier.com](mailto:fhughes@vancourier.com). Please include a contact name, phone number, email address and history of the individual or group.*

—Fiona Hughes