



# Volunteering Your Specialty For Children Around the World

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Stress looks different for every physician, but after 13 years of practice, I can't remember a time when I wasn't stressed.

For some who practice in high-volume, high-complexity situations, stress might look like overload. For physicians like me, it's almost the opposite. As a pediatric neurologist practicing in a rural setting, the face of stress is monotony. I've been at both ends of the spectrum, having been a military battalion surgeon in Iraq, practicing with limited resources in rural Cambodia for several years, and now as a pediatric neurologist in Idaho. I'm not sure which is worse – overload, with intellect and bandwidth taxed to the maximum, or the quiet lull of routine care.



The stress-buster I've found seems to help physicians at both extremes. Just over a year ago, I began volunteering to provide consults for international adoptions of kids with complex medical conditions. The group I work with, Connecting Kids with Care (CKWC), pairs medical practitioners with children who are being considered for adoption from orphanages in developing countries around the world. All of these children have conditions that need to be explored before adoptive parents can welcome them with eyes wide open.

In as little as 30 minutes (or as long as several hours or across several days), I can review charts, photos, biographies, labs and a write-up by a local pediatrician – all online, at a time that works for me. Sometimes there are short videos or a video conference with in-country medical staff. Based on my findings, I can diagnose, recommend treatment, or offer a prognosis.

In the cases I've worked with so far, I've encountered conditions that anyone but a neurologist might miss. About 95 percent of the cases I work on are tailored to my specific expertise. I've "seen" a patient who was diagnosed with hydrocephalus and a cyst in the brain and learned that it was simply a mega cisterna magna, a benign enlargement of the venous sinus of the brain. This meant that her prognosis was good, and could likely result in a successful adoption.

When I am partnering with Connecting Kids with Care, a nonprofit outreach of Jackson Healthcare, I'm practicing pure medicine. I'm puzzling out a diagnosis or putting together treatment recommendations.

The CKWC medical staff already assembled all of the paperwork and images I need, so I simply dive into the work I love. And beyond the medical details of the case, I have the privilege of helping to prepare the adoptive family for life with their new family member.

What will life be like for the little boy or girl? What will life be like for the family? What are the long-term medical and lifestyle implications?

While it's nice to think that just adopting these orphans, bringing them to the U.S., and loving them will be enough, the reality is that it will not be easy for these families, ever.

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It is put-life-on-hold hard. Break-your-marriage hard. Love-to-the-point-of-exhaustion hard. But if I can prepare them for life with their adopted child by fully and tactfully informing them of the medical expectations, I can make it a little easier.

This work brings me back to the reason I became a physician – to help people. Too many outstanding physicians today spend too much time addressing regulations and filling out paperwork. We feel pressured, devalued, or just plain frustrated, and that is the heart of why I volunteer like this. The intellectual stimulation energizes me, and I thoroughly enjoy the mental challenges. Being able to help a family that has eagerly opened their lives and hearts to a child with medical difficulties is something I can't ignore.

Families like that are a glimpse of what is good in the world. Simply helping them with my medical skills is a privilege – a chance to see how I can make a world of difference for one small child and his new family. It's very, very satisfying, and it's something I can do in just a few short minutes.

Connecting Kids with Care is open to physicians, nurse practitioners, physical therapists and other medical professionals ranging from medical geneticists to family practitioners. While medical participants can specify the frequency and type of cases they will consult on, there is typically a greater demand for help than there are medical staff to address those requests.

If you're not already volunteering, I encourage you to consider it. I highly recommend visiting Jackson Healthcare's Connecting Kids with Care [website](#). Signing up does not obligate you in any way, but will offer opportunities to volunteer your specialty for a child or children around the world.

*Paul Fleenor, DO, is board certified in pediatrics and neurology and practices in Caldwell, Idaho. Prior to his current position, he practiced in California, Cambodia and Iraq. He has been married for 21 years and is the father of seven children, ages two months to 16 years old.*

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