

San Diego Surgical Team Changes Face of Patient Care Overseas

By Michelle Brubaker | October 01, 2012



“Angels from heaven” is how patients described Anna Kulidjian, MD, professor with UC San Diego School of Medicine, and her team after they successfully performed 24 hip replacement surgeries during a trip to the mountainous region of Armenia, a place in desperate need of surgical care.

The week long medical journey was part of a rare humanitarian effort among health care organizations, orthopedic surgeons and donors in San Diego and Armenia.

“It was a year-long effort to select eligible patients who needed surgery but didn’t have the financial means or access to specialized surgeons. Most patients were wheel-chair bound and living in villages with no communication to the outside world,” said Kulidjian, orthopedic surgeon at UC San Diego Health.

Armenia has a 20 percent infection rate and 30 percent dislocation rate with joint replacement surgeries. Kulidjian and her team worked around the clock to teach the Armenian surgeons techniques in a variety of areas, including device placement, physical therapy, anesthesia and operating room safety for sterilization.

“My team was stunned at the need for education and lack of surgical equipment in Armenia,” said Kulidjian. “I was born in Armenia, so this experience touched me both professionally and personally. It was challenging emotionally and physically, and I realized what a privilege it was to have been educated in the



United States. I kissed the ground when I landed on American soil.”

Patients who thought they would never walk again are now standing and functioning in a way they never dreamed possible.

“One of the patients kept kissing the hand of a San Diego surgeon. It was incredibly rewarding to see how gracious these men and women were after the years of suffering they endured,” said Kulidjian.

Click on the above photo to see an Armenian patient walk after a successful hip replacement.

This was also a monumental project for the San Diego surgeons who worked as a strong team and learned from each other during difficult circumstances.

“This experience changed the lives of all involved. We went back to our organizations with new perspectives, a higher confidence level in dealing with complications and a better appreciation for orthopedic surgery practiced around the world.”

The trip also included a hike with the entire team to the top of Armenia’s Mount Aragrats - the highest peak in the country at 13, 419 feet. The hike was part of a fundraising effort to raise money for items such as pain medication, tools and devices used during joint replacement surgeries.

“Efforts like this can truly change the course of health care. It was a successful mission that has given both the Armenian surgeons and patients more power and opportunity for a better future,” said Kulidjian. “We look forward to returning again.”

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