



Humanitarian – Scientific Mission for the Children of Southern Madagascar Organized by a Team of Greek Paediatricians, at the Request of the Church of Southern Madagascar: The Mission's Rationale and its Outcomes

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Toliara is a city of 120.000 residents in Southwestern Madagascar, which has a population of 2.2 million people. The region experiences rainfall only once a year, access to clean water is limited, the average daily wage is equivalent to 1,5 euro and the concepts of free healthcare, prevention, vaccination and free education are unknown to the population. According to the United Nations data, at least 1.15 million residents of Madagascar are currently at risk, with 30,000 in immediate need of assistance. Approximately 15% of children in Southern Madagascar, die before reaching their first birthday, while the average life expectancy is 50 years for men and 55 for women. In the region, significant work has been accomplished thanks to the continuous and challenging efforts of the Bishop. A clinic has been established, providing free medical care to 3000 patients monthly, along with a program for malnourished children. Additionally, nine schools have been built, offering free education, an orphanage has been constructed and wells have been opened. Access to clean water is not a given and its scarcity threatens human existence while becoming a source of infectious diseases for children and their families.

This area was the focus of a ten day humanitarian – scientific mission organized and implemented by the Association of private practice paediatricians of Northern Greece in collaboration with the Orthodox Diocese of Toliara and Southern Madagascar.

The efforts and struggle of the Diocese require continuous support, both humanitarian and medical – voluntary. Therefore, the mission was designed based on three pillars

- The shipment of humanitarian material (infant and children's food, multivitamins and probiotics due to malnutrition, personal care products for infants, food for families, school supplies for operating schools, clothing for children, items for the needs of the orphanage) in containers, as well as pharmaceutical materials (air transport) for the needs of the Toliara clinic.
- The composition of a 15 member volunteer team designed to cover all the needs of the mission, consisting of 7 paediatricians from across Greece, as well as a nurse, a pharmacist, a dentist, an educator, a lawyer, an accountant and a bank employee.
- Training the team in tropical diseases and first aid.

The support provided by the volunteer team included

- Medical work with clinical examination of children at the Toliara clinic (which has a microbiological and radiological laboratory) and the provision of medication. Of great importance, was the participation of volunteer paediatricians in the malnourished children's program that is ongoing at the clinic, which includes measuring weight, height and mid – upper arm circumference, assessing them based on WHO growth charts, promoting breastfeeding by providing nutritional supplements to mothers and enhancing feeding with powdered infant formula. The volunteers – in addition to the diseases and conditions they face in their daily practice of primary paediatric care (mainly lower respiratory tract infections), also encountered the diagnosis and treatment (under the guidance of local doctors at the clinic) of tropical diseases endemic to the area (malaria, parasitic infections, typhoid fever, tuberculosis) and experienced the absence of preventive care.

- The volunteers frequently encountered neglected cases (serious skin infections, abscesses requiring surgical treatment etc.) during their two missions to remote villages, where they examined over 450 children and adults. They often observed neurodevelopmental disorders due to complications during childbirth because women give birth at home without access to proper postnatal care. Among adults, and especially women, a common finding encountered in many African countries is low back pain and neck pain due to the habit of lifting and carrying heavy loads on their heads.

The preparation and execution of the mission have taught the volunteers the importance of team cohesion, the value of volunteering, and confronted them with the harsh realities of poverty and the deprivation of basic goods faced by our fellow humans on the other side of the world. This experience fosters a growing sense of responsibility and the need for continuous contribution within them.

Practicing medicine with empathy and knowledge -from a different perspective, one that is more human – centered and tailored to the needs of individuals at that moment, based on the prevailing conditions – proved to be a valuable experience. Doctors had to improvise many times during the mission. They used their hands and knowledge in different and often extreme conditions. They had to take medical history in another language, interpret it, engage their minds to find solutions and adapt treatments to the circumstances. But, at the end of the day, medicine is fundamentally the same everywhere.....

However, the most precious moments are those when our volunteers gaze into the eyes of the small children during examination, offering them a small candy or a ballon in their open palms, symbolizing their need for help. Above all, its their smiles that leave a lasting impression on the hearts and minds of the paediatricians – smiles that are profoundly instructive for every citizen in Western society.



Figure 1