

Healing after the TSUNAMI

Written by Karen Carlson

When Bonnie Wirfs, M.D., '83, first heard about the tsunami, which devastated many nations in south Asia on Dec. 26, 2004, a little voice inside her said, "Go."

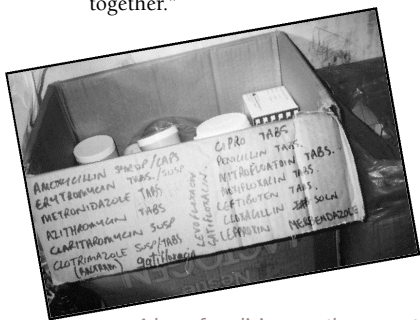
"I knew I needed to do something," she recalls.

So, with the International Medical Health Organization (www.imhoua.org), Dr. Wirfs spent two weeks in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, helping 1,200 victims of the disaster, along with other American, British and Canadian physicians.



Dr. Wirfs

"Only the first half-mile of the ocean front was hit, but the devastation goes on and on," Dr. Wirfs says. "If I looked one way, I could see the beauty of the beach, its coconut palms and white sand. But when I turned around, I was wowed by the devastation. The buildings are rubble. I had a hard time putting the two images together."



A box of medicine was the nearest "pharmacy."

Every morning, she and other volunteer physicians loaded supplies and medicine into a van and drove to an assigned refugee camp. "There were 100 refugee camps in one province," Dr. Wirfs says. Every day, she visited one or two camps, which could be a classroom, tents on sand, private homes, mosques or even a

loading dock. Anywhere from 25 or 30 people to several hundred families flocked to the camps for medical care. "It was organized mayhem," Dr. Wirfs says. "There was way too much to do, too many people and not enough supplies." Desperate residents mobbed her while she handed out toothbrushes. "People grabbing at you was scary, but these people had nothing." She also saw some patients at Batticaloa General Hospital.

"It was difficult and exciting and awful and fun," she says. "I liked being part of a whole huge mass of people all doing the same thing with no personal gain."

Amid the 90-degree humidity, daily torrential rain, diagnoses of diarrhea, upper respiratory infections, sea water ingestion, malaria, musculoskeletal injuries and post traumatic stress syndrome, numerous patients became indelibly marked in Dr. Wirfs' mind, like the 11-year-old boy with hazel eyes who wrote a powerful poem about the tsunami, writing, "Ocean mother, why did your hunger prey on our families?"

Another heartbreaking tragedy was a man who had been holding both of children in his arms when the force of the water pulled the children away. "He said flatly that he didn't wish to live anymore. I would feel the same way."

But she recalls a 12-day old baby who survived because her mother scrambled to the roof of their home. "It stuck out for me because my great-grandmother was a newborn infant at the time of the great Chicago fire. Their house burned down, so they went to the lakefront. I told this baby's mother that their story will be told in their family for generations to come."

As a physician, Dr. Wirfs says this caregiving was "the purest medicine I have ever done. We saw people as they came, examined them, treated them, and gave



Photographs courtesy Bonnie Wirfs

the patients notes to give to their next doctor. There were no insurance records, no social records, just medical. And I saw everybody who came — I'm an internist but I saw babies. That wouldn't happen in the states."

She also did some impromptu medical education for her interpreters, who were medical students, helping them make physical diagnoses.

By the time her two weeks were over, Dr. Wirfs had mixed feelings about leaving. "I missed hot showers," she confesses. The initial crisis was calming like the ocean waves, and relief effects were getting more organized, as people knew doctors were coming every couple of days.

"I feel like I made a small difference," she says. "Now the people need different help. Now it's a housing and infrastructure crisis. The medical needs are more psychiatric."

Dr. Wirfs is pleased that she listened to that little voice in her head. "It was a wonderful, awful experience. I'm absolutely glad I did it." ■

Dr. Wirfs is medical director for Lincoln Lutheran, a non-profit organization that operates two nursing homes and provides other long-term care services in Racine, Wis.