Knowledge and Compassion: Terrence Sheehan, M.D. ’86
Chief Medical Officer for Adventist Rehabilitation Hospital of Maryland

BY ELIZABETH WALKER

AFTER THE MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE KILLED HUNDREDS of thousands of people in Haiti, Terrence “Terry” Sheehan, M.D. ’86 helped to organize a nine-member team of medical experts to treat survivors who suffered limb loss, spinal injuries and brain trauma.

Sheehan, a rehabilitation physician/physiatrist, has volunteered his services in Haiti several times in recent years with Physicians for Peace. He knew that this trip would present tremendous challenges—the Physicians for Peace facilities in Haiti had been destroyed by the quake and the needs of those who had lost limbs would be even greater.

“We’ll have a tent hospital that can handle 250-500 beds,” Sheehan explained two days before the team traveled to Haiti in March. “We put together a group of MacGyver-type medical people—people who can improvise—because everything has been destroyed. We wanted people on the ground who could give the medical care and comfort people would need. We have doctors, nurses and prosthesists on the team.”

Treating the whole person
Helping people who experience dramatic changes in their lives due to trauma or disease is familiar territory for Sheehan in his “every day job,” as he calls it, as chief medical officer for Adventist Rehabilitation Hospital of Maryland, in Rockville. Adventist is an acute rehabilitation facility that specializes in traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, as well as strokes and amputations. Invited to join Adventist in 1999 to open a rehabilitation hospital, Sheehan has led a team of medical professionals who work together to help patients regain function and adapt to their new circumstances.

“I work with therapists, psychologists, nurses and others to look at all the pieces that must come together to restore function for the patient,” he said. “We treat the whole person by helping people recover from physical and cognitive injuries. We lead them back to life. Adapting can involve equipment, like power wheel chairs, prostheses, other assistive devices or simply education.”

Sheehan’s broad view of the field and sharp focus on the individual patient has positioned him as a national leader, innovator and spokesperson in the areas of limb loss, amputation and spinal cord injury. In addition to his work at Adventist, Sheehan serves as medical director for the Amputee Coalition of America and he has worked to establish the first national standards of care for addressing the needs of individuals with limb loss.

Finding a calling and a vocation
Sheehan, who grew up on Staten Island in New York, credits his sister, Eileen, who passed away the night he left for Haiti, with helping him go to college. In fact, she and her husband dropped him off for his first day at Assumption.

“My hope when I came to Assumption was that I would be a doctor,” Sheehan said. “It’s because of Assumption that I’m a doctor—and, more importantly, that I’m rehabilitation doctor. In addition to my science classes, I took a class at the rehabilitation institute on campus, which introduced me to the social sciences and to rehabilitation as a field. It changed my life. It showed me that a doctor could be involved with rehabilitation. I minored in social gerontology and had an internship at UMass Medical, where I worked with a Harvard-trained neuropathologist. Those unique experiences got me to medical school, where I found a real calling and a vocation in physical medicine and rehabilitation.”

These days Sheehan, a father of four boys, finds himself reflecting on his Assumption experience as he helps one of his sons explore his college options.

“I remember the amazing relationships I had with my professors, who not only knew me by name, but also knew me,” he said. “Professors and, more importantly, that I’m rehabilitation doctor. In addition to his work at Adventist, Sheehan serves as medical director for the Amputee Coalition of America and he has worked to establish the first national standards of care for addressing the needs of individuals with limb loss.

Eugene Byrnes, Pat Reisert and Hubert Meunier were exceptional and caring teachers. I considered Fr. Edgar Bourque, A.A. and Fr. Dennis Gallagher, A.A. ’69 my close friends. I’m very appreciative of Assumption and of the nurturing environment and excellent education it provided to help me be successful.”

Sheehan earned his medical degree at the State University of New York – Buffalo School of Medicine and completed his residency in Boston at Tufts University - New England Medical Center. He is certified by the American Board of Spinal Cord Injury, the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and the American Board of Independent Medical Examiners.

A decade of rapid change
Like his patients, Sheehan has had to adapt to rapid changes in rehabilitation technology and in the healthcare industry.

“Over the past 10 years, we’ve seen an amazing growth in the availability of different technologies,” Sheehan said. “We’ve learned from our wounded warriors because of the needs they’ve come back with—especially limb loss and multiple traumas. Because of the advancements in the prostheses and in the new electronics-type assistive devices that we can offer to our patients, we’re enabling them to live more fully, with more control.”

Looking ahead, Sheehan sees tremendous advancements in the research for and treatment of limb loss and spinal cord injury.

“With the evolution of research, we’re going to see wonderful opportunities for those with spinal cord injuries to be able to recover function and I’ll be right in the middle of that. That in itself is exciting.”

Until then, Sheehan will use his extensive medical knowledge, great compassion, deep faith and national platform to “lead back to life” people who have lost limbs or mobility due to trauma, disease, accidents—or earthquakes.
“We treat the whole person by helping people recover from limb loss and adapt to changes in their lives. We lead them back to life.”

—Terrence Sheehan, M.D. ’86