

Doctors can play role in alternative diplomacy

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Thursday, Nov 27, 2008, Page 8 Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines the term "alternative" as "offering or expressing a choice," and "different from the usual or conventional." In medicine, there are often alternative options when the obvious approach does not or cannot work. For example, if operating on the normal pathway presents a considerable risk to the patient, doctors and medical professionals weigh the benefits of a detour, making arterial bypass surgeries "alternative" solutions.

While alternative medicine and alternative therapy are often used in the medical community, "alternative diplomacy" is a concept foreign to most. We at the North American Taiwanese Medical Association (NATMA) have been exercising alternative diplomacy for years now. International health missions are NATMA's approach to the goal of establishing Taiwan as a political force with a strong and positive presence in the international community.

In 2002, NATMA, an association of more than 1,400 health professionals, initiated its first Annual International Health Clinic. As an organization of healthcare providers, NATMA is based on the fundamental principle that the act of giving back to society, with kindness and compassion, is a fundamental human truth. The American College of Surgeons has similarly launched its "Operation Giving Back" and its members participate in Doctors Without Borders. These programs have made an immediate impact in changing the world for the better, one patient at a time.

For the past six years, we as an organization have begun to realize not only how much of a positive impact we can have on the world, but also the great deal of satisfaction we experience ourselves by giving back to society. There are numerous stories of patients reaching out to NATMA in appreciation of our efforts. The mother of a child with massive hydrocele told me that her child was now able to go swimming

with friends for the first time. A battered wife with multiple fractures no longer feels helpless and is now able to stand up for herself and start a new life. A portable machine we recently took to developing countries to fix long overdue, neglected dental problems was years ahead of any medical technology the people there had ever encountered.

Addressing the infected skin, diarrhea and malnutrition of adults and children with large supplies of antibiotics, vitamins and medication allows patients to go back to their everyday lives. We are improving their overall quality of life. The in-person, intimate contact these people receive from caring Taiwanese-American physicians without a doubt strengthens the bond of friendship and humanity in their respective communities. This, in turn, serves to ultimately improve the image of Taiwan and its relationship with the rest of the world.

Since the early 1970s, Taiwan has been isolated from the rest of the world because China falsely claims that Taiwan is a renegade province. China threatens to take over Taiwan by force, if necessary. Fear of standing up to this 800-pound gorilla causes the world to look the other way from this injustice. Taiwanese need to continue to empower themselves to educate the rest of the world. As Taiwanese-Americans, we need to do everything in our power to preserve the freedom of a democratic Taiwan.

Winston Churchill was once quoted as saying: "You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life." Through international health missions, our form of alternative diplomacy, NATMA can now stand up to China and stand for something bigger. Let's make NATMA, as a whole, stand for something greater than the sum of its parts. Let's start, one patient at a time.

(Jung Tsai is the president of the North American Taiwanese Medical Association.)