

The Richness of Caring for the Poor: The Development and Implementation of the Touching Hands Project



The American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH) was started shortly after WWII by 3 great Americans; a politician (Franklin Delano Roosevelt), a general (Norman T. Kirk), and a duck hunter (Sterling Bunnell). The efforts of these 3 great individuals spawned the specialty of hand surgery and in 1946 the establishment of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand. Their efforts have benefited countless lives around the world via improvement in hand care and hand surgery. The ASSH was built on and runs on volunteers.

The society is an organization with a rich history of giving via leaders that preceded all of us sitting here today. For example, Paul Brand embodied the altruistic physician missionary. Dr. Brand dedicated his life caring for persons with leprosy across 5 continents including the United States. He broke down many of the misperceptions regarding leprosy patients, also known as the untouchables. My favorite misunderstanding is recounted in his book *The Gift of Pain*. There was a common belief that in patients afflicted with leprosy, their fingers fell off secondary to the “bad flesh” of leprosy. Dr. Brand doubted this concept and lived with the untouchables to assess their daily life. He established sentinels to stay up all night and observe the patients sleeping. In the middle of the night a rat climbed onto the bed of a patient, sniffed around tentatively, nuzzled a finger, and meeting no resistance, began to gnaw on it. Since leprosy results in the loss of feeling, the patients slept soundly unaware of the rat causing digital destruction. Dr. Brand emphasized the necessity of afferent pain signals to negate harm to our extremities, both in our feet and hands.

Dr. Brand’s contribution to hand surgery and to volunteerism should not be forgotten. One of Dr. Brand’s guiding principles was, “Though our profession may be a technical one, concerned with tendons, bones, and nerve endings, we must remember that it is the person behind them who is most important.”

The American Foundation for Surgery of the Hand (AFSH), established in 1987, had its roots in the fostering of research and education and has awarded over \$2.4 million in grants. In fact, seed grants from 2007–2012 totaled \$1.4 million and resulted in over \$11 million in extramural grant monies to advance the science and practice of hand surgery.

The ASSH and AFSH have seen its members, offerings, and presence expand to previously unforeseeable “wealth” in knowledge and monies. Just in the last few years, we have purchased our own building, instituted Hand-e, and published a Hand Society Textbook. Sterling Bunnell would be proud. These resources have allowed us to do many things that have benefited the global hand community, our members, and our patients.

But we have more to do. A crucial element has been added to the Foundation’s mission by Peter Weiss, my colleague and friend for 20 years. I have made the implementation of this project the cornerstone of my

presidency. The mission has been expanded to include outreach. In other words, the Foundation has provided the leadership in science and technology and now the outreach element will provide the soul to the ASSH and AFSH via volunteerism and the Touching Hands Project. Some members have donated, some members have participated, and I am hoping many more members will now become involved.

We must realize the privileges of being an accomplished physician and being a member of the ASSH. This privilege comes at a price. We must appreciate our good fortune and share it with others by putting our gifts and training into service. I stand in front of you as your humble 68th president of the ASSH and I am going to ask you to do more.

—To do more for humanity, to expand the presence of hand care to the “have nots” in this world. The world is not a fair place. Remember, one-half of the world still lives on less than \$2 per day. Martin Luther King said, “Of all the forms of inequity, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhumane.” So many people live in squalor without access to health care. We live in a world with horrible inequalities and we are called upon to do something, as doctors and as humans, to repair the world.

Last year’s Founder’s lecturer, Peter Stern, said, “Volunteerism is the essence of clinical medicine—you truly make a difference in people’s lives. The appeal of these trips comes from making new friends from a different culture, having the opportunity to teach third-world health care professionals who are starving for medical knowledge, and you perform challenging surgeries in suboptimal conditions necessitating creativity and innovation.”

Volunteerism cannot involve quid pro quos—the act needs to be given from the heart. We have a moral obligation to balance the scale. What does the ASSH have to do with poverty and inequalities? As you will hear from this year’s Founder’s lecturer, Peter Carter, we have talents in hand surgery that we must give away. As Bill Clinton has written, “One of the greatest gifts anyone can give is a useful skill. Transferring that knowledge and that ability to use it can empower others in amazing ways.” In short, give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

Dr. Paul Farmer was my presidential guest speaker but was urgently called to Liberia to help with the Ebola crisis. Dr. Farmer spent most of his childhood in poverty, living in a family bus, boat, and even a tent. Nobody that I have ever met “walks the walk” more than Paul Farmer. Bill Clinton has referred to Paul as “one of the world’s greatest full-time givers.” His accomplishments in Haiti, Africa, and Russia are legendary. He has torn down many of the misperceptions and misunderstandings concerning caring for the poor and rationing health care. He has made clear that medical care is a basic human right and not a privilege solely for those who can pay. He has said, “We must avoid general anesthesia for the soul.” In other words, we cannot stop caring or feeling compassion. Feel the pain of others, feel the pain of your patients, feel the pain of their caregivers—it hurts, but it cleanses your soul. Paul’s influence guided the inaugural Touching Hands Project to Haiti and you will hear more about that mission later.

I am not standing in front of you singing Kumbaya and asking you to give up your life possessions for the benefit of others. I certainly enjoy the finer things of life and feel lucky to have them. I understand the pressures of practice and the need to pay overhead, provide for ourselves, and support our families. But I am asking you to help. You can help with money via the

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