

# Bermuda Sun

5/18/2007

## Docs to perform free plastic surgery on Africa's poor

A team of surgeons and support staff are traveling to Tanzania in July to take part in one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives - reconstructing faces on some of the most disadvantaged children on earth.

The group, called Project Change Bermuda, is traveling with a small team to the East African country, which borders Kenya and Rwanda, for 13 days and hopes to help at least 50 children who are living with cleft lips and palates, burns, hand and leg disfigurements and other chronic wounds.

Reconstructive surgeon Christopher Johnson is heading the team along with dentist Debra Tuzo.

Dr. Johnson, who runs a successful private practice and has helped treat scores of patients at the King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, says he can't wait to roll his sleeves up and get to work.

Opens doors

"These children are often ostracized because of the way they look. If we can offer reconstruction, it really opens a lot of doors for them," he said.

Project Change Bermuda has been around for about three years. It's essentially a medical mission group that provides free reconstructive surgery for people living in impoverished conditions.

The group is going to Tanzania at the request of Dr. Tuzo.

"She has been going there for several years. We were planning a trip to Africa and became aware of one another and came together for this," Dr. Johnson said.

Dr. Tuzo, who is Bermuda's representative for a U.S. based non-profit health organization called Ahead, is delighted Dr. Johnson and his team have agreed to take part in the mission.

She said: "These young folks have so many disadvantages and it's a further social stigma to have a cleft lip and palate; it puts them at even more of a disadvantage.

"If we can help them with their appearance and self esteem it gives them the opportunity to go on and become productive members of society."

The group heads out on July 15. They will be staying in the capital city of Dar Es Salam close to the hospital where they will be performing the surgeries.

Dr. Johnson, who is also the chairman of the Road Safety Council, loves his job here, but finds these trips particularly rewarding.

"It's part of a bigger picture," he says. "We are so fortunate here in Bermuda to enjoy the lifestyles that we do, we have to give back.

"Whenever I go on these trips I get really grounded and focused on what's important and what's not. To feel the gratitude these people feel, it warms my heart and reminds me of why I became a doctor in the first place."

The group is in the process of raising money for the trip.

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## **Mission to Africa: How you can help**

African children are about to get free health care, but someone still has to pay for it. And that's where you can help.

To help raise funds, Project Change Bermuda has organized a great charity theme night on Saturday, June 9 at the Aquarium.

It promises to be a lot of fun. The theme is Casablanca the movie. Guests are encouraged to dress the part and enjoy a night of Crown and Anchor and other casino games.

Tickets cost \$50 and will be available from Dr. Christopher Johnson's practice in the Sea Venture Building, next door to the Hamilton Pharmacy on Parliament Street.

### Donations

Dr. Johnson is also appealing for anyone else who would like to make a donation, especially big businesses to call his office on 292-2000.

He said: "It costs thousands of dollars for tickets, instruments and supplies. It really is quite expensive. But our aim is to provide the highest quality care.

"We don't lower our standards because we are going to a Third World country - these children deserve the best treatment money can buy."

And he said benefactors could rest assured that all their donations will be spent on the children. The team pays for its own airfares.

Some people have already contributed to the effort without giving money.

Dr. Johnson said: "We have so many benefactors. We have a group of ladies, including Dr. David Dyer's wife, Janet, who knits toys that we give to the kids in the recovery room."

Every bit helps, he added. "I want to thank everyone in advance for their support."