



PA Service to the Underserved: **Sixtus Atabong, PA-C**



Purposeful Medicine

PA Brings Healthcare to Underserved Communities Worldwide

BY GILLIAN GAYNAIR

THE NEWS ABOUT HIS FATHER MARKED A TURNING POINT FOR SIXTUS ATABONG.

It was 2007, and Atabong was working as a physician assistant in neurosurgery in Lubbock, Texas. Word had arrived from back home in Cameroon that, due to complications from diabetes, his father's leg had to be amputated. "My parents are illiterate and all they do is farming," said Atabong, who came to the United States a decade earlier on a soccer scholarship. "If you are a farmer in a village like that, you are done."

Atabong wondered: If something like this could happen to the father of a son who has resources and a medical background, what would happen to other villagers who have nothing?

The experience inspired Atabong to establish Purpose Medical Mission, a nonprofit that provides healthcare pro-

grams and services to people in need worldwide. Through his organization, Atabong built Healing Touch Hospital, the first medical facility in Muyuka, the central village of the region where he grew up in Cameroon. The hospital serves 16,000 people and is staffed by local doctors and nurses.

It is just one of several examples of how Atabong has lived out the mission of the PA profession to improve the quality of life of those most in need—both in the United States and abroad. For his service, Atabong will be honored with the 2013 PARagon Award for PA Service to the Underserved during IMPACT 2013: AAPA's Annual Physician Assistant Conference in Washington, D.C.

"I'm incredibly humbled and honored," Atabong said of the award. "I hope and pray that other PAs will be inspired ... to make a sustainable change in whatever community they're in."

Long before he established Purpose Medical Mission, however, Atabong always sought to help communities in

need. It's his way of giving back.

In his early years in the United States, Atabong worked three, sometimes four jobs to pay for his college education. Some of the jobs were in hospitals, which exposed him to PAs. He was impressed with the diversity of specialties afforded to PAs and their independence. After earning a bachelor's degree in medical technology, Atabong enrolled in the PA program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

While there, Atabong founded the Cameroonians of Lubbock Association, which provides volunteer opportunities and support to African immigrants in west Texas. As the student representative for the Texas Association of Physician Assistants, Atabong led several outreach efforts to underserved communities both locally and internationally.

It was when his father's undiagnosed diabetes led to the amputation that Atabong resolved to follow his heart back home. He envisioned creating a place that provided preventive care for villagers in the Muyuka area. "I just wanted to build one little building," he said, "and convince a nurse to come and do basic blood pressure checks and help people with basic hygiene."

By now, Atabong was working as a PA. He shared his idea with his supervising physician and requested time off at least twice a year to travel to Cameroon. To Atabong's surprise, his physician said he wanted to be a part of what Atabong was trying to create.

"I never dreamed of taking Americans to Cameroon," said Atabong, who today runs a clinic in Lubbock where he screens patients with significant neurological deficiencies. But with the assistance of other PAs such as Mike Reddell, a founding member, Purpose Medical Mission was born, and the "one little building" Atabong had envisioned

is today a fully functioning hospital with two operating rooms that delivers more than 200 babies a year and has reliable water and electricity.

Atabong and his team of PAs and physicians travel each year to Cameroon to work at Healing Touch Hospital and also have provided education to staff there and at government hospitals. His organization also works with a clinic in Guatemala, training local providers on first aid and safe childbirth practices, particularly in areas where there are few resources.

"The vision of Sixtus Atabong to make a difference in the lives of so many people has been amazing," said Kathy Marcum, PA-C, and also a founding member of Purpose Medical Mission.

This year, Atabong and his team will travel to Nicaragua to determine the feasibility of creating a sustainable clinic model, similar to the Cameroon facility. Meanwhile, in Cameroon, Atabong next plans to create satellite clinics in surrounding villages and upgrade labor-and-delivery services at the main hospital.

Atabong remains acutely aware of how his journey began—of being one of the first kids to leave his village and make it to the U.S., and of all the opportunities that have crossed his path.

"This is how I'm supposed to give back," Atabong said. "Otherwise, how do you say thank you for everything?" **PA**

To learn more, visit www.purposemedicalmission.org.

Gillian Gaynair leads Mallett Avenue Media, a multimedia firm that specializes in storytelling, with a focus on public health in underserved communities around the world.

