Binational Physician

When Anula Jayasuriya ’80, M.D. ’84, Ph.D. ’91, M.B.A. ’93, wanted to bring medical manpower and expertise to her native Sri Lanka, she remembered Interplast, the nonprofit a fellow physician had told her about. The organization, which sponsors free reconstructive plastic surgery for children in developing nations, had no program in Sri Lanka, but was willing to lend its support if she could make the necessary contacts with local host physicians.

That was in 1998. Jayasuriya has now organized several trips to Sri Lanka for Interplast-affiliated doctors and made four trips herself. She doesn’t perform surgery—her training is in pediatrics—but she is always present, seeing patients before and after their surgeries and in the operating room. “Since most of the patients are children, my pediatrics training comes in handy,” she says. “Of greatest value is my training, coupled with my contacts and cultural and language familiarity with Sri Lanka. This is important in understanding and meeting the needs of the host country.”

This past August, the venture capitalist—she pursued a business degree after medical school, convinced that it would help connect her with the business aspects of another of her interests, biotechnology—was named to Interplast’s board. That means, she says, that she can be “much more broadly involved with different countries and in influencing Interplast’s future direction.”

Anula Jayasuriya helps unload surgical supplies in Sri Lanka.

For Jayasuriya, who came to Harvard as a foreign student, “Medicine has a very important service aspect that I want to keep alive even though I do not practice medicine. Interplast has been a channel to keep this aspect of community service alive and to help the very poor people in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.”

Many impoverished Sri Lankans live in thatched huts and use kerosene lamps for light, making fires—and often debilitating burns—common. The civil war that has ravaged the country for 17 years has brought new sources of injury, such as land mines. Facial, eye, and hand surgeries have formed the bulk of Interplast’s work in the country. “This is all about reconstructing and restoring functionality,” Jayasuriya explains.

Interplast is also committed to training local doctors in state-of-the-art techniques and supplying them with new equipment, so patients can be treated long after the visiting physicians have gone home. In Sri Lanka in particular, training has become a major focus.

To Jayasuriya, this illustrates her favorite business concept: “leverage,” which to her means bringing together aspects of science and medicine and accomplishing as much as possible with limited resources. “The beauty of Interplast is that [Sri Lankan] surgeons now have the expertise to do it themselves,” she says. “That’s the whole point to me, to build an expertise that can be amplified within the country.”

Laura L. Krug