

Reducing Climate Change for Improving Health

By Lin Chin-Lon, CEO, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation

In October of 2018, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nation met in Incheon, South Korea. At the meeting, IPCC released “The Final Warning”: a shocking picture showing a group of polar bears living on an iceberg littered with trash. Climate change and global warming is now not just a tip of the iceberg. It is a real threat for the existence of human beings. Experts warned that by 2030 if we cannot effectively control the temperature of the earth; our ecology will be in serious crisis and will endanger our survival.



Climate change induced natural disaster occurs all over the earth in recent years, and damage is increasing every year. Working with the Tzu Chi organization, we are seeing the impact of the catastrophe. On March 15, Cyclone Idai swept three African countries: Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Thousands of people died and many more lost their homes. Soon as the news arrived, Tzu Chi mobilized its four missions for disastrous relieve. Within the Medical Mission, Superintendents of all Tzu Chi hospitals led their staff to solicit support and care from the general public. The Tzu Chi volunteers prayed for the victims to receive sufficient materials and to resume their normal lives.

Two months later, in May, as the flood receded, Tzu Chi relief materials continued for delivery. Meanwhile, the Tzu Chi Medical Mission organized its volunteer team to serve in Mozambique.

I recognized that there were three historical firsts in the event of the Mozambique free clinic. First, this was the first time any Tzu Chi volunteers worked in Africa. Secondly, this was the first time all four hospitals' (Hualien, Dalin, Taipei and Taichung) Superintendents participated in the same voluntary event. Thirdly, this was the most lacking in terms of medical supplies. One can easily see the sufferings. Mozambique's food and housing conditions are under-developed; even water supply is questionable. Sanitary conditions are even worse, mosquitos everywhere and it is in a high risk zone of "yellow fever", typhoid, cholera, and other infectious diseases. Therefore, before we departed on our mission, all volunteers must be vaccinated and take preventive medicine. Several preventive measures were continuing upon our return to Taiwan.

In a free clinic of such a historic scale, every detail of the event must be carefully laid out in advance. The detailed plan must include arrangement of manpower, medical supplies, crowd control and movement, water and power supply. More importantly, experienced personnel must be arranged in each specialized group so that unexpected shortcomings could be properly addressed. The Tzu Chi Mozambique voluntary medical team covered almost all medical fields. Members of the volunteers included general physicians, surgeons, gynecologists, pediatricians. Our Mozambique Sister, Tsai Dai-Lin, told us that they lack doctors in orthopedics. So we recruited orthopedics personnel from the Tzu Chi hospitals. There were no herbal medicine doctors locally. Tzu Chi medical is strong in Chinese Medicine, so we included herbal medicine specialists in the team. Special thanks are to the participations of our four superintendents from Tzu Chi Hospitals. In addition to the medical personnel from Taiwan, dentists and nurses from Australia also joined this team.

During the planning stage, we were informed that local women prefer female gynecologists. For this reason, we invited our reproduction medicine specialist Dr. Chen Pao-Chu (Thantar Tin Myint, her Myanmar name) from Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital to join us. I heard later that she was very busy in the clinic, but she was very happy for the opportunity to serve.

Preparation and shipment of medical equipment was an important element of our mission. Thanks to our brothers and sisters, they arranged the shipment of ten huge cases, approximately 500 kilograms, of equipment from Taoyuan, Taiwan to Africa. As for the medicines, because of the local customs regulations, we decided to purchase medicines locally. The arrangement was made by Dr. Karmen Long of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA), who came to Mozambique earlier from England.

Thanks to TIMA Southern Taiwan members Dr. Lin Yu-Yin, Dr. Yeh Tian-Hao and Pharmacist Chen Hung-Yen (wife of Dr. Yeh) for coming to Beira, Mozambique a few days early to help setting up the venue. Dr. Yeh is a plastic surgeon and had participated in many large scale international free clinics. Yeh inspected the field in advance; he also inspected the facilities for bacteria free surgical standards. Unfortunately, he discovered the damage induced by Cyclone Idai was too severe. In addition, the wide spread of AIDS in the area posed high risk for surgeries. Considering the safety of the general public, surgeries were not performed in this clinic. Nevertheless, volunteers did their best to serve the local citizens. As our voluntary medical services went on, we were deeply moved by the enthusiastic participation of the local people. We nicknamed our local bodhisattvas “Black Peals”, for their optimism and contentment.

It has long been a goal of Dharma Master Cheng Yen that the powerful hands of Tzu Chi people would bring better life to our African friends. Our relief efforts after the disaster of Cyclone Idai in the three Africa countries brought us one step further to achieve our Master’s goal.

The Tzu Chi Medical Mission is a member of the Health Promotion Hospital (HPH) of the World Health Organization since 2007. Since that year, we participated in all their annual conferences. Every year we send our delegates to the conference to deliver technical papers and discuss our work-in-progress. This year, because I attended the Warsaw Conference in May and the conflicting schedule, I missed the opportunity to join the African clinical event.

The idea of Health Promotion Hospital, simply speaking, is to promote health for the body, mind, spirit and the earth. This year's conference was "The 27th International Annual Health Promotion Hospital and Care Organization Seminar". Tzu Chi sent a delegation of 14 people to the convention. Our main theme included: green hospitals, environmental protection and reduce climate change. Another key effort of our team was to discuss our efforts and results in long-term health care.

In this annual seminar, we found that environmental protection was not just for discussion, many practical results were presented. In this conference, the organizer stayed away from the traditional paper and plastic utensils and avoided unhealthy refreshments. They carefully selected reusable plates and cups, such as glass and ceramic cups, wooden forks and environmental friendly plastic straws, etc. All these little details forged a big step towards the promotion of environmental protection.

The frequency of natural disaster increased tremendously in the recent years. We, the fortunate ones, should seize the opportunity to serve in the disastrous area for the sufferings. Our Master constantly reminds us to "be mindful", increase veggie diets, adjust our habits to reduce carbon footprint and do everything possible to slow global warming. If we all work hard like Master said, disasters due to extreme weather can be reduced and this earth can be a better place for all beings.