The ILAR-East Africa Initiative: Supporting Rheumatology Education in Africa

With the support of the International League of Associations for Rheumatology (ILAR) and the volunteer work of rheumatologists from the international academic community, the ILAR-East Africa Initiative started in 2009. Its mission is to accelerate the development and improvement of clinical rheumatology in the East African countries. The goal of this Initiative is to unite the international rheumatology community to aid in enhancing clinical rheumatology services in the East African countries. Specifically, the aim is to raise awareness of the impact of adult and pediatric rheumatic diseases among the East African medical and general community, and to train medical professionals, nurses, and allied health workers in the care of patients with rheumatic diseases. Based at the Kenyatta National Hospital, the main teaching hospital of the University of Nairobi, the program will expand to other Kenyan cities and East African countries. Dr Omondi Oyoo, one of the very few rheumatologists in Kenya and currently the head of The African League of Associations for Rheumatology (AFLAR), has been the local champion and facilitator of the project.

This Initiative relies on the partnership between the international rheumatology community and local East African institutions (universities, hospitals, and government), as well as other physicians and community leaders. The focus is on two main areas: patient care and rheumatology education. In addition, members of the Initiative support research projects to ensure that this program responds to the unique needs and reality of East African patients and physicians.

The work of the Initiative led to the establishment of the first rheumatology clinic and registry in East Africa. The involvement of international rheumatologists in teaching medical students, residents, and health professionals has inspired bright internal medicine and pediatric residents from Nairobi to consider pursuing rheumatology training.

Although still young, the Initiative has strengthened during the almost three years of work thanks to rheumatologists from across the globe, who have volunteered to share their enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience either working from their own centers or teaching in Nairobi. From Canada, Dr. Paul Davis has been to Nairobi on a yearly basis as an external examiner, while Dr. Henri Ménard, Dr. Sasha Bernatsky, Dr. Carol Hitchon, Dr. Rosie Scuccimari, Dr. Peter Tugwell, and Dr. Ines Colmegna, together with other rheumatologists from the United States and the United Kingdom, are actively involved in the development of the educational and patient care programs. In addition, practitioners from other disciplines such as nursing, occupational/physiotherapy, and psychology have become involved. Local initiatives have also arisen; the most vivid example in this area is the systemic lupus support group that was started by a local woman, Ms. Sharon Kodhek, a few years ago. The support group now has over 200 members that meet on a monthly basis at the Nairobi Clinic.

The growing interest, input, and involvement of people around the globe and the achievements of the first three years of work have expanded the Initiative’s action plan. A webpage has been created (www.arthritisafrica.org), and a foundation has been set up to support the education of professionals and community workers in rheumatology. Opportunities to expand the work to other cities are hopefully on the horizon. There are multiple ways in which you can become part of this effort. For more information, please contact Dr. Ines Colmegna at ines.colmegna@mcgill.ca or Dr. Paul Davis at paul.davis@ualberta.ca.

ILAR-East Africa Volunteers
www.arthritisafrica.org