

Hospital ship arrives in Madagascar to deliver surgical care and training

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"The entire team at the Canadian national office is pleased to support the many *Africa Mercy* volunteer crew members from Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia", stated Executive Director Darryl Anderson.

Current Canadian crew of the hospital ship serve in operating room sterile processing and ward clinical supervisor roles. Vital support positions include transportation & maintenance manager, end-point analysts and housing-keeping positions. Since the crew members serve the needs of an entire community, volunteer medical and maritime staff, information technology, teachers, chaplains/counsellors, and receptionists are an essential part of life onboard the hospital ship. The wide range of skilled professionals speaks to the generosity of spirit that characterizes the humanitarian work of Mercy Ships volunteers. Throughout Mercy Ships' time in Madagascar, dozens of other volunteers from across Canada will join their international colleagues to help provide free surgical services and contribute to medical capacity-building initiatives.



TOAMASINA, MADAGASCAR – International charity Mercy Ships returned to Madagascar to bring transformative surgical education and free, life-changing surgeries.

Freshly refitted hospital ship, the upgraded Africa Mercy® has arrived at the island nation to build on the charity's longstanding collaboration and will provide specialized surgeries in various fields, including maxillofacial and ear nose and throat, general, pediatric specialized general, pediatric orthopedic, cataract surgery, and reconstructive plastics.

But islanders are being urged to wait to hear on local radio stations about small regional patient selection opportunities in their area for certain conditions rather than to make their way to the ship where no selections are happening.

A 2016 study of Madagascar revealed that only 20% of the population can access surgical services within a two-hour timeframe, and up to 95% would face financial ruin if they required surgery. With a scarcity of physicians, approximately 20 for every 100,000 people, the prospect of receiving necessary surgical treatment seems unattainable for many.

In Mercy Ships' fourth field service, with preceding visits in 1996, 2014–2016, the charity will begin by focusing on enhanced partnerships and relationship-building as part of its education, training and advocacy (ETA) program in combination with building up its surgical schedule.

Esperant Mulumba, Mercy Ships Country Director in Madagascar, said: "We plan to spend the weeks following the ship's arrival running patient registration in several different locations and these details will be released on local radio and advertised in the specified areas of the greatest need. Surgeries can only go ahead for specific conditions when we have a full complement of volunteers to ensure specialized surgeries can happen as planned at the end of May without delays and rescheduling.

"Again, prospective patients should wait for updated information to be released through local radio stations – no patient selections will be conducted at the ship."

Mercy Ships is actively collaborating with Madagascar's Ministry of Health to identify the most pressing needs and strengthen the country's surgical systems in the long term. Through the ETA strategy, the organization aims to increase the

number of surgical providers, provide training across the surgical ecosystem, develop sustainable educational programs, establish a network of healthcare providers, and advocate for the importance of surgery in healthcare globally.

This focus aligns with a need for quality education and training that emerged in a recent evaluation carried out by Mercy Ships in Madagascar.

Mulumba said: "There is a huge desire within the health system in Madagascar to improve the quality of education. We will be able to leverage the availability of the ship in the port of Toamasina as a platform through which we can strengthen the surgical training program that the government has by providing residencies and other sorts of training opportunities for local surgeons, anesthetists, and other professionals of the healthcare system, particularly those related to the surgical ecosystem."

Over the course of previous visits, Mercy Ships collaborated with the government and Ministry of Health to provide more than 6,425 life-changing surgical procedures and over 52,395 dental procedures. In addition to delivering life-changing surgical and dental care, Mercy Ships has a longstanding commitment to education, having trained 2,019 healthcare professionals in the past.

Mulumba added: "In our last field service, we were able to provide life-transforming, life-changing, life-enabling surgeries that have allowed the people that benefited from them to be part of the communities they come from and allowed certain people to return to their jobs. They brought a certain dimension of hope that otherwise would not have been experienced... an impact that we can't measure. We're seeing professors that are still teaching the simulation courses that were initiated by Mercy Ships, and we're seeing the interns that are still benefiting from this."

Highlights of the *Africa Mercy's*® refurbishment included an information technology (IT) upgrade enhancing the ship's operating theatre functionality and performance by enabling seamless coordination between the *Africa Mercy*® and Mercy Ships' latest hospital ship, the *Global Mercy*™, currently serving the nation of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Upgrades will support the provision of essential training for local doctors, fostering the development of in-country healthcare professionals. Additional improvements included the modernization of the galley, upgrades to the elevator system, and remodeling of several cabin spaces, enabling the ship's community to better serve those in need of surgical care.

There are still some volunteering positions available to find your place on board.