The MRRH Palliative Care Outreach Program Story

Mbale Rregional Referral Hospital (MRRH) is the safety-net hospital for East Central Uganda and serves a diverse community of Muslims, Christians and Jews. As in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, access to appropriate pain management and hospice care is severely limited.

Until 2013, the MRRH Palliative Care program consisted of one certified palliative care nurse, Taaka Esther, who cared primarily for hospital in-patients and those able to attend clinics. In 2013-14, while on sabbatical leave from the University of Colorado Medical School, Dr. Evelyn Hutt began to collaborate with Taaka Esther to develop an outreach program. Outreach is critical because more than half of all Ugandans with life-threatening illness have no access to medical care. Esther leads a dedicated, all volunteer team of five Village Health Team workers (VHTs), two social workers, and an additional nurse who provide home visits and pain medication to people in their respective villages who are too sick to leave their homes. The program has been operational for10 years and currently serves approximately 200 patients in five neighborhoods and villages close to Mbale. The outreach program serves all in need, regardless of economic status, religion or tribal background and is proud to deliver culturally and religiously respectful care. The team performs home visits daily. In 2016 the Palliative Care Association of Uganda recognized MRRH as the Ugandan hospital with the best integration of palliative care services.

MRRH currently has a relationship with Abode Hospice, who supplies approximately 75% of its budget. MRRH proved to be a very responsible recipient of partnership funds, growing its case load from 80 in 2015 to consistently around 200 since 2017, using an all-volunteer work force. Partnership funds are used to provide transportation and lunch for staff on home visit days, as well as cell phone airtime and medical supplies. Dr. Hutt has retired and now Drs. Allison Wolfe, Kerry O’Connor, and Devin Gilhuly and NP Nicole Rondinelli are leading the project with Taaka Esther.

The Mbale Palliative Care team works independently on a daily basis led by nurse Taaka Esther. The University of Colorado coordinates funding for this team. The University of Colorado also provides educational material to the team as well as mentoring to Taaka Esther. We meet with Taaka Esther every few months to troubleshoot issues that come up and try to optimize the budget as best we can to best serve the needs of the patients and team. Every few years a representative from the University of Colorado performs a site visit to maintain the strength of the partnership and see first-hand how the University of Colorado can help.