

The Volunteer Connection

In This Issue:

Oncology Essentials in Nepal

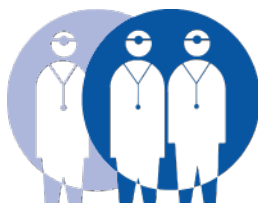
Advancing Flow Cytometry in Tanzania | HVO Launches New Projects



Photo courtesy of Nandini Bakshi

“HVO has played a pivotal role in guiding the development of our oncology training program...and has also helped us establish international collaborations, which are critical for knowledge exchange and research opportunities.”

- Rajeev Sharma, MD



Health Volunteers Overseas
Transforming Lives Through Education

Letter from the Executive Director



Dear friends,

Though there is much uncertainty right now in global health with the United States withdrawing from the world stage, HVO and our vast community continue to work undeterred and with renewed commitment. This work has resulted in new ultrasound machines and training in Nepal, the expansion of palliative care services in Bhutan, the training of rehabilitation professionals in Haiti, and so much more.

Health professionals everywhere save lives, day after day, often working tirelessly and making significant sacrifices to care for their patients and communities. They need our support now more than ever, especially in low-resource countries, to advance towards a future where everyone, everywhere has access to health care. In this issue of the Volunteer Connection, we share just a few of stories from some of our incredible partners and volunteers.

Stories like that of Dr. Eunice Shija from Tanzania, who traveled across the world to gain life-saving expertise and has since trained her colleagues, improving outcomes for countless patients with cancers and blood disorders. And Dr. Soniya Dulal and Dr. Rajeev Sharma in Nepal, who, with support from HVO volunteers, are transforming oncology practice in their country and expanding the number of people with access to life-saving care.

Their stories inspire us and are a testament to the power we have when we work together.

Thank you for being part of this critical work.

Sincerely,

April

April Pinner, MSPH, RD
Executive Director

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Want to be the first to know about our latest programs, volunteer opportunities, and impact stories? Sign up for text messaging!

Visit <https://tinyurl.com/hvo-text-sign-up>, or scan the QR code, and check the box to sign up to receive text messages from HVO.



A Collaborative Approach to Strengthening Cancer Care Capacity in Nepal

Dr. Melanie Thomas, an HVO volunteer since 2010, spent five months in Nepal during the second half of 2024 as a Fulbright Scholar working with Drs. Soniya Dulal and Rajeev Sharma on a curriculum for a new oncology training program at B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS). Dr. Dulal and Dr. Sharma are two of only forty oncologists in Nepal, a country of 30 million people. Dr. Sharma noted that funding for faculty development is lacking, and many practitioners leave Nepal in search of opportunities abroad.



Photo courtesy of Melanie Thomas

Before 2020, there were no oncologists at B.P. Koirala. Cancer patients were cared for by internists. Dr. Dulal has been working to change that since her arrival. Currently, she and Dr. Sharma see up to 60 patients a day, more than three times the number of an oncologist in the U.S. That leaves them little time to devote to curriculum development.

Dr. Thomas met Dr. Dulal through weekly online tumor boards led by HVO project director Dr. Prakash Neupane. The calls, which started in early 2021, have provided much needed support to physicians caring for cancer patients at the National Academy of Medical Sciences (NAMS) and Bhaktapur Cancer Hospital, where Dr. Dulal worked before moving to B.P. Koirala. Dr. Thomas joined the group in 2021 to lend her expertise. “I loved doing it because the cases they present are fascinating and complicated,” she said. “They have a lot of young people in Nepal getting adult cancers. Through the tumor board, just learning more about the oncology workforce in Nepal, I realized how small it is.” Her relationship with Dr. Dulal grew through these calls, and Dr. Thomas was drawn to her and to her enthusiasm for improving the quality of care in her country. “I was really struck by Soniya. She’s just an amazing person, full of knowledge. I learned from her that their oncology training program, which opened in 2016, closed in 2023. They didn’t have the ability to train any more oncologists. I had a couple of WhatsApp calls with Soniya to talk about that, and in 2023 she told me she and a colleague were trying to create a new training program for one resident at B.P. Koirala.” Dr. Thomas saw a chance to support her friend and colleague and use her skills to make an important contribution to advancing cancer care in Nepal. She said, “Here’s this young person not only doing this incredible clinical load but also trying to start a fellowship program. That’s a huge amount of work. I said, if you’re going to do that, then I’m going to come help you. Here, we have entire committees doing what she was proposing, and there, she and her partner Rajeev were going to try and do it themselves.”

Dr. Sharma said and Dr. Dulal were happy to have another member join their team, and they also appreciated the general support of HVO volunteers. Dr. Sharma said, “There is an urgent need to strengthen oncology training and services in Nepal. Given the increasing burden of cancer in the region and the lack of specialized training programs, we recognized that an international partnership could help us bridge gaps in education, mentorship, and patient care. The opportunity to work with experienced oncologists from HVO has provided invaluable support in developing our DM Medical

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Oncology curriculum and enhancing clinical training.” After making the decision to lend her support to the training program, Dr. Thomas needed to determine the logistics of a long trip.

She had read about the experiences of another HVO volunteer, Dr. Karl Woodmansey, after he spent several months in Nepal on a Fulbright Scholarship working with colleagues he had met through HVO’s oral health program in Kathmandu, Nepal. His story inspired her to apply for her own Fulbright, which she was awarded, and she prepared for a five-month stay in the second half of 2024. Together, she, Dr. Dulal, and Dr. Sharma used WhatsApp to plan her visit and how to make the most use of their time together. First, they needed to apply to Nepal’s medical council for formal approval. “There’s funding involved,” said Dr. Thomas. “We submitted an application explaining who the staff is, how many patients the hospital sees, who would supervise the trainee. It’s a three-year training program. When you apply for a new training program, you start small to show you actually have the capacity. It takes a lot of time to train a new person. The person would be someone who has already finished an internal medicine residency and now wants to go on to specialty training.” In addition to a lot of time, it takes a lot of materials. By the end of her stay, Dr. Thomas had completed the curriculum for the full three-year training program, including over 100 talks, PowerPoint presentations, assignments, and a list of essential papers for trainees to read.

“No one else is doing this work. This is our thing. We can do this on a national level as a creative way to address the need for cancer care.”

In order to ensure that the materials she provided fit her partners’ needs, Dr. Thomas spent time at the beginning of her stay joining rounds and observing. “It’s pretty remarkable,” she said. “Patients pay for nearly everything. They live in mountain villages and come down with no appointments, no records. A family’s ability to pay determines what you can recommend. If they can’t afford a PET scan, you can’t do one. That’s something we don’t have to deal with here. We have issues with insurance approval, but we can get what we want.” Lack of affordable care isn’t the only challenge. “They have a lot of infectious diseases we don’t see in this country – malaria,

tuberculosis, scrub typhus, dengue...so what that means is that every patient, whether they’ve just been diagnosed or are in treatment, you have to take into account all these diseases. Sometimes people will present with what looks like cancer, but it’s actually very advanced tuberculosis. We saw patients who would present with low blood counts that looked like leukemia, but you can’t jump to that conclusion. So oncologists have to be very good infectious disease clinicians as well.” Dr. Dulal and Dr. Sharma work with only two or three internal medicine residents and a few nurses to take care of all these patients.

“How can they even do this?” asks Dr. Thomas. “Many people would give up with all these challenges. But I saw that they didn’t give up. They were there for these patients. The challenges only made them think harder about how they can still take care of each person. It makes them really good clinicians. I just admire them so much.”

Once the curriculum was finalized, the final piece was recruiting someone to train. Each fall, a national exam is administered to all residents interested in subspecialty fellowships. In 2024, only half of the 200 residents passed the exam and none of those decided to pursue oncology. Dr. Dulal and Dr. Sharma had hoped to have their new trainee begin in November, but this setback means waiting another year, which is a disappointment after everyone’s hard work. “It was kind of devastating,” said Dr. Thomas. “We had

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Photo courtesy of Melanie Thomas

done all this work, and no one took the slot.”

But the team did not let this disappointment slow them down. Instead, they looked at a new way to raise interest in oncology and educate more of their colleagues. They organized a conference for internal medicine residents. “We invited two residents from every medical program in the country, around thirty-four residents,” explained Dr. Thomas. “All thirty-four came. We did a day and a half of activities to interest

them in the field and explain the burden of cancer care need in the country. Most were not aware. We talked to them about what it is like to be an oncologist, what training is like. We had a whole session on palliative care, which is a big need in Nepal. The goal was to recruit them and help them recognize that no matter what field they go into, they will be part of taking care of cancer patients.” Dr. Dulal and Dr. Sharma were also pleased with the outcome. “The conference was a significant step in increasing oncology awareness among residents,” said Dr. Sharma. “It provided an interactive platform for learning, networking, and discussing real-world oncology cases. The impact was evident in the increased interest among young physicians in pursuing oncology as a career. For future conferences, we aim to include more hands-on workshops, case-based discussions, and international expert sessions to enhance engagement and practical learning.”

The workshop was so successful that they are planning another for the fall of 2025, this time expanding to practicing physicians as well as residents. Given how few oncologists there are and how long it will take to build up that capacity, it is essential that primary care providers also become trained in caring for cancer patients.

Despite leaving before a trainee could be recruited, Dr. Thomas feels her time there was a success. “I had been focused on training new oncologists and making the curriculum. It was disappointing not to get a new oncologist this year, but in the end, it helped us broaden our thinking of how we can take care of more patients. No one else is doing this work. This is our thing. We can do this on a national level as a creative way to address the need for cancer care.”

The conference was not the only gathering that took place during Dr. Thomas’s stay. In August, a local club of 20 medical students organized a breast and cervical cancer screening for women in Dharan, Nepal. These students are young, in their early 20s, and volunteer their time because they recognize the vast need for support. Over one hundred women came to learn about the importance of cancer screening and early detection.

BPKIHS may not have gotten their desired trainee this year, but they hold out hope for next year. The program is too important not to pursue. “The medical oncology program at BPKIHS will have both immediate and long-term impacts,” said Dr. Sharma. “In the short term, it enhances our ability



Photo courtesy of Melanie Thomas

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to provide specialized care by increasing the number of trained oncologists. In the long run, it will help develop a sustainable oncology workforce, improve cancer treatment outcomes, and contribute to oncology research in Nepal. Furthermore, this program will strengthen our institution's reputation as a center for oncology training and patient care."

Dr. Thomas will be returning in 2025 to assist with the execution of the second oncology conference this fall. "My involvement is going to continue," she said. "It didn't end when I came home. This all came about through my involvement with HVO through this simple tumor board. My story fits so much with HVO's mission: put people together and see where it goes. Soniya and Rajeev have benefited tremendously from HVO. They were at the National Academy of Medical Sciences (NAMS) when HVO volunteers were going there. Their training was very much impacted by HVO volunteers. It may have started with just one institution in Kathmandu but ended up training six or seven oncologists and hasn't ended, even with the closing of the program at NAMS. It's just going to keep growing." Dr. Sharma agrees that HVO has been supportive. "HVO has played a pivotal role in guiding the development of our oncology training program," he shared. "Their visiting experts have provided mentorship, conducted lectures, and facilitated hands-on training, significantly enhancing our academic and clinical programs. HVO's support has also helped us establish international collaborations, which are critical for knowledge exchange and research opportunities." He and Dr. Dulal hope that HVO volunteers will continue to provide virtual and in-person training as well as support in curriculum refinement, research collaborations, and accessing international oncology guidelines and resources.

"Building a strong oncology training program in Nepal is a collective effort, and the contributions from international partners like HVO are making a meaningful difference."

"We are incredibly grateful for HVO's support in this journey," Dr. Sharma said. "Building a strong oncology training program in Nepal is a collective effort, and the contributions from international partners like HVO are making a meaningful difference. We look forward to continued collaboration and expanding our efforts to improve cancer care in Nepal."

For the most up to date information on opportunities with our oncology projects, visit www.hvousa.org or contact Lauren Franklin at l.franklin@hvousa.org.



Photo courtesy of Melanie Thomas

New Projects



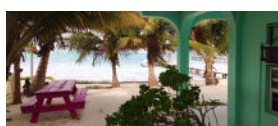
Obstetrics and Gynecology, Tanzania - Volunteers support “See and Treat” triage for cervical cancer screening across northeastern Tanzania through didactic, clinical, and combination instruction and help standardize patient education on cervical cancer screening and prevention. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/oncology/>.

Oncology (Radiation), Nepal - Volunteers will work with personnel to increase knowledge and skills in medical, surgical and radiation oncology and increase the capacity of oncologists to design, conduct, and publish research. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/oncology/>.



Oral Health, Nepal - Volunteers improve knowledge, attitudes, and skills of students, clinicians, and faculty associated with Tribhuvan University’s dental department by providing didactic lectures, clinical instructions, and demonstration workshops. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/oral-health/>.

Orthopaedics, Paraguay - Volunteers will work to increase the knowledge and skills of orthopaedic residents and attending orthopaedists by providing lectures, rounds, and hands-on surgical training and mentorship at Hospital de Clinicas and Hospital Nacional. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/orthopaedics/>.



Rehabilitation, Belize - The project will improve the knowledge and skills of physical therapists, medical providers, and medical students. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/rehabilitation/>.

Rehabilitation, Georgia - This online project, in partnership with McLain Association for Children (MAC Georgia) in Tbilisi, aims to foster collaboration among interdisciplinary team members in rehabilitation as well as to update their knowledge and skills in treating adult and pediatric patients with neurological problems. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/rehabilitation/>.



Rehabilitation, Haiti - This online project is in collaboration with the Department of the Sciences of Rehabilitation of Léogâne (FSRL). Volunteers may teach in PT and OT bachelor programs, and provider faculty development opportunities. Learn more at <https://hvousa.org/specialty-areas/rehabilitation/>.

News and Events

Advancing Flow Cytometry Practice to Improve Patient Outcomes in Tanzania



Photo courtesy of Dr. Eunice Shija

Dr. Eunice Shija met HVO volunteer Dr. Jared Block during one of his assignments at Muhimbili Hospital in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. When she applied for an American Society of Hematology (ASH) Visitor Training Program Award in 2023, it made sense for her to spend her time under his mentorship at Dr. Block's institution in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Shija respected him and his teaching, and she welcomed a chance to dedicate ten weeks to training with him in the United States.

Dr. Shija went to deepen her understanding of flow cytometry, a laboratory method that measures and analyzes cells to help diagnose blood cancers. "Because we depend on morphology – using microscopes to diagnose conditions – I found a lot of misdiagnoses," said Dr. Shija. "I wanted to get more training on flow cytometry. Our department has a flow cytometer, but we still encounter challenges interpreting results. I saw a gap, and I wanted to bridge that gap." During her visit, she had the opportunity to interpret many bone marrow biopsy specimens and practice diagnosing malignancies. "They have the flow cytometer, but they need exposure to enough cases to interpret what they see in the data reliably," explained Dr. Block, speaking of Dr. Shija and her colleagues. "It takes a large volume of cases to be comfortable, and exposure to our cancer center provided that. She saw a tremendous amount here and gained a lot of confidence. Now she can recognize when things don't look normal."

Dr. Shija's experience in viewing and interpreting numerous flow cytometry tests in the U.S. will have an immediate impact on her practice in Tanzania. "There's no question this will allow patients to have longer life expectancies," said Dr. Block. "Most of these diseases are serious, but if you treat them, patients can live disease-free for years. For some, if you don't treat their disease quickly, it can be fatal. Being able to recognize issues swiftly is vital for patients." Thanks to her training with Dr. Block, Dr. Shija can quickly identify many more abnormalities. She is also passing that training on to her seven colleagues. "Upon my return, I taught my colleagues and the lab technicians," she said. "I am currently conducting morphology teaching sessions for residents. I was also able to take part in creating operational guidelines for many other tests performed in our department that were initially not included. I was able to demonstrate the value of these tests and integrate them into our daily diagnostics." These tests have led to diagnoses that might have otherwise been missed and have facilitated faster patient treatment, as diseases are recognized more promptly.

"[Dr. Shija] saw a tremendous amount here and gained a lot of confidence. Now she can recognize when things don't look normal."

News and Events

Now that her colleagues have received training, Dr Shija would like to expand her teaching to include hematologists from other hospitals and physicians in different departments, like oncologists. Training more providers is essential, with only approximately thirty-five practicing hematologists in Tanzania. “This is not sufficient,” says Dr. Shija. “We’re trying to do it all. We need help.” She believes HVO volunteers could help further by providing training for lab technicians and scientists. Government funding is another essential element, as the department needs money to buy the reagents necessary to keep the flow cytometer functional and sustainable.

During Dr. Shija’s ten weeks in North Carolina, she was impressed by the tumor boards she saw and participated in. Tumor boards allow providers to gather and share complex cases and advice. “Upon seeing this, I was able to come back and tell my department of its importance and initiate one here,” said Dr. Shija. “Now we discuss our patients. It has been invaluable because each doctor initially managed cases differently. Now, we have a consensus on all patients based on guidelines. It has been used as a teaching and discussion opportunity to learn new guidelines and techniques. We have seen a real positive impact from these meetings.”



Photo courtesy of Dr. Eunice Shija

Though Dr. Shija has returned to Tanzania, Dr. Block remains a resource for her and her team. He provides online consultations as they continue to improve patient care and outcomes. To learn more about volunteer opportunities with HVO’s hematology program, contact Lauren Franklin at l.franklin@hvousa.org.

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Make a gift today at <https://hvousa.org/hvo-volunteer-connection-gift/> or scan the QR code.



In Memorium



Jean Francisco

Mrs. Jean Francisco, an HVO supporter and donor for thirty years, passed away at the age of 103 earlier this year. She and her husband, orthopaedist Dr. David Francisco, traveled to South Africa with Orthopaedics Overseas in the 1990s. Witnessing firsthand the profound impact of his work, Mrs. Francisco became deeply committed to HVO's mission of education and training, giving generously to support our efforts. Her dedication and generosity leave a lasting legacy in the global health community.



Donald Webb, MD

Donald Webb, MD, an HVO volunteer and supporter, passed away in February of this year. Dr. Webb began volunteering with Orthopaedics Overseas when it was still affiliated with CARE-Medico and remained active as Orthopaedics Overseas transitioned to Health Volunteers Overseas. Over the years, he traveled to Vietnam, Bhutan, Malawi, and Ethiopia sharing his expertise and serving resource-scarce communities. Dr. Webb lived a life of service, volunteering not only with HVO but several other organizations, including the Santa Barbara County Orthopedic Clinic for low-income patients.

Call for Feinberg Fellowship Proposals

While the core of HVO's program model relies on the utilization of short-term volunteers, we recognize there are critical needs at many of our partner institutions that require longer volunteer placements to ensure effective, sustainable solutions. We established the Feinberg Fellowship to address these needs and to provide financial support to volunteers able to commit to assignments of three to six months in length.

HVO is calling for members of our community to submit proposals for projects that need long-term volunteers. Each fellowship must have clearly defined goals, objectives, and concrete deliverables. The training beneficiaries must be clearly identified. Fellowships may be three to six months in length. The host institution must be a current HVO partner/collaborating institution. If interested, complete and return the application form to Lisa Vu, l.vu@hvousa.org.

Scan the QR code or visit <https://tinyurl.com/HVO25-fellowship-request-form> to access the application.



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A planned gift ensures that HVO will be able to continue to make important educational strides in the improvement of health care in resource-scarce countries.

When you write or review your will, please consider leaving HVO a charitable bequest as an investment in HVO's future. To discuss making a bequest in your will or other charitable aspects of your estate planning, please contact Danielle Stonehirsch at d.stonehirsch@hvousa.org.

If you have already made a charitable bequest, please let us know. We would like the opportunity to express our gratitude and will honor all requests to remain anonymous.

Thank you to the following people who have made this commitment:

Anonymous (7)
Charles & Sandy Blitzer
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