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Sturdy doctor lends a hand

Surgeon returns after volunteering in Costa Rica

BY LAURA CALVERLEY
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ATTLEBORO — A local doctor is back in the area after spending time in Central America performing needed orthopedic surgery.

Dr. James Snead, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and a sports medicine specialist at Sturdy Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Associates, spent a week in Costa Rica in May volunteering in surgery.

While there, Snead, 43, performed more than 20 surgeries at three different hospitals, mostly knee and shoulder operations.

Snead does similar work at the Sturdy Orthopedics group which he helped found about eight years ago.

"I got a lot out of it. It was very rewarding," said Snead, who grew up in Indianapolis and now lives in Wrentham.

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VOLUNTEER: After time in Costa Rica, surgeon back

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Snead's journey started by connecting with Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the health care of developing countries through the training and education of local health care providers.

Snead worked with Dr. Fernando Contreras, director of Orthopedic Surgery at San Juan Hospital in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica.

Contreras, who completed his residency training in the United States, coordinates week-long stays in Costa Rica for U.S. health providers.

Snead paid for his own flight, hotel room and food while there and used a week of vacation time for the trip. And, he said, he'd do it all again in a minute.

"It was great. I'd definitely go back," said Snead, who worked on professional sports teams including the Saints during his residency in New Orleans.

Snead said the hospital facility and operating rooms were nice and the doctors, who all spoke English, were very good, but he was surprised by how long patients had to wait for treatment.

"It's a whole different system. It's a government system. Patients wait 2-4 years to have a total joint surgery done, a knee or hip replacement," Snead said.

Some of Snead's patients had waited six months to a year for their surgery.

"It's amazing how resilient and patient the people there were," Snead said.

Snead performed a complex shoulder stabilization surgery at a hospital in Cartago, a small moun-

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Dr. James Snead

tain town.

"It was the first time they had done that surgery in that hospital. That was a pretty cool day," Snead said.

Snead also served as a teacher to other doctors. The doctors asked many questions while observing Snead's operations.

"It was a nice experience for me. I learned just as much as I taught them," Snead said.

The language barrier was a little tough for Snead even though he speaks some Spanish. Most of the nurses, lay people and hospital workers did not speak English.

"I'm not fluent, but I was able to communicate," he said. "My language skills improved after being there."

He told his family in an email that after taking care of people from a different culture, he realized that "no matter what nation we come from, we are all one human race."

"We all have different backgrounds and beliefs, but when it comes to medicine, we're basically the same. We all want care," Snead said.

Snead hopes to make another trip in a year or two and he may bring his high-school-aged son with him.

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SUBMITTED

Dr. James Snead, left, worked with Dr. Fernando Contreras, right, the director of Orthopedic Surgery at San Juan Hospital, during the week that he spent in Costa Rica.