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Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Cardiologist Makes Medical Mission to Tibet To Treat Young Patients With Heart Defects

Incidence of congenital heart disease as high as one in 20 in Tibet, altitude plays a role

PITTSBURGH, - November 30, 2005 - Continuing a tradition of offering state-of-the-art cardiac care to children in remote regions of Tibet, a Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh cardiologist recently returned to the mountainous region where he helped diagnose and treat young patients with heart defects.

Bradley B. Keller, MD, chief of Cardiology at Children's, coordinated an international medical team in late October that screened, diagnosed and treated nearly two dozen Tibetan children and a 42-year-old woman with congenital heart disease. The medical team has screened more than 4,000 Tibetan children for heart disease in the last year alone, offering treatment - ranging from catheterization to surgery - to more than 40 patients with potentially life-threatening forms of heart disease. The patients were screened and treated at the People's Hospital in Lhasa, Tibet. Patients with more complex heart conditions were sent to Anzhen Hospital in Beijing for surgery.

The mission - known as "Touching Hearts in Tibet" - is sponsored by the South East Asia Prayer Center (SEAPC) in Oakmont, Pa., and Variety Children's Lifeline, an international charity that provides medical and surgical assistance to underprivileged children in developing countries. Matt Geppert serves the project as SEAPC's United States representative.

Children's cardiologists have been traveling to Tibet to treat congenital heart defects as part of "Touching Hearts" for the past six years, but the hospital's ties with Tibet go back even further. In the late 1980s, James R. Zuberbuhler, MD, a Children's cardiologist at the time, completed a research survey of congenital heart disease at increasing altitude in China, including the Tibet Autonomous Region in the Himalayan Mountains.

Dr. Zuberbuhler's study confirmed that low oxygen levels at high altitudes increase the risk of congenital heart disease, including a condition called patent ductus arteriosus (PDA). The ductus arteriosus is a blood vessel that shunts blood away from the lungs as the lungs are developing and then closes once they are developed. At high altitude, however, low oxygen can result in PDA - meaning that the vessel never closes. Pulmonary blood flow and pressure are increased, resulting in pulmonary hypertension and premature death.

Following Dr. Zuberbuhler's research, another former Children's cardiologist, William Neches, MD, joined the "Touching Hearts in Tibet" mission, serving as medical director. Following Dr. Neches retirement from Children's Hospital in 2005, Dr. Keller took over as medical director.

"Normally, about one in every 100 children has heart disease, but it is much more common at high altitude," Dr. Keller said. "Unfortunately, there are very few medical resources for these Tibetan children. I'm proud to be able to continue the tradition started by Drs. Zuberbuhler and Neches of traveling to Tibet to provide care to these children. Our goal is not only to

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provide immediate care, but also to train the medical staff in these remote regions so they can continue the program as self-sustaining."

At the People's Hospital in Tibet, Dr. Keller partnered with cardiac specialists from China and Japan to diagnose and, in most cases, treat heart defects using interventional cardiology. This including the first three procedures ever performed in Tibet to close an atrial septal defect - a hole in the upper chamber of the heart - and the first interventional procedure to treat an adult with congenital heart disease.

Editor's note: To view a copy of Dr. Keller's bio or for more information on Children's Heart Center, please visit Children's online press room at www.chp.edu. Electronic copies of photos from Dr. Keller's Tibet trip are available upon request.

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