



Haiti Health Initiative

PARTNERS PROMOTING HEALTH ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME

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March 2012 Mission to Timo, Haiti

Nutrition Report Kathleen Nielsen, RD

Kathleen Nielsen, the Food and Nutrition Director at McKay-Dee Hospital (Ogden, Utah), has been a registered dietitian for more than 30 years. In 2010, she became the Director of Nutrition for Haiti Health Initiative and accompanied their team to Haiti in 2011. She is passionate about her objective to provide basic nutrition education in rural Haiti and to improve nutrition in culturally appropriate and sustainable ways.

INTRODUCTION

A dietitian has been a member of every expedition since Haiti Health Initiative (HHI) was formed. Originally included to help address the high incidence of anemia among the residents of Timo, the dietitian has helped the team understand the issues that contribute to under-nutrition, which is a significant cause of anemia.

The overall purpose of the dietitian was to improve the nutrition knowledge and food choices of the population of Timo. Objectives included the following: first, to gather more information about what food is available and how it is stored and prepared by families; second, to assess the effect of basic nutrition education provided by community health educators since the last expedition and continue to train health educators; third, to provide nutrition education to four schools; and fourth, to update and improve educational materials and provide basic nutrition education to all community members who came to the clinic.



REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

All members of the community (approximately 1200) who attended the medical or dental clinic received the basic nutrition course (what each of the three food groups do for the body, which foods pertain to each group and how to plan balanced meals). A fence was put up around an area large enough to hold 4-5 teaching stations, then tents and awnings were set up inside the fence, so groups of people could be taught simultaneously and could move from one teaching station to the next in an organized fashion. Most community members were able to verbalize some understanding via the oral quiz at the end of each class.



Corn grinder used by the people of Timo.

I accompanied a team that visited four schools and provided education to many of the students (approximately 160). I taught the lessons the first two times while the community workers observed. After that, the community workers did all the nutrition teaching to the students. We explained the 3 food groups, then gave them each a paper dinner plate and asked them to draw one food from each of the three groups on the plate. The students in the public schools struggled to understand the concept of choosing a food that they would eat from the food groups. The students from the private school were able to complete the assignment without much coaching.

We were able to train five community health workers and three translators on how to teach these basic nutrition concepts. They will be able to continue teaching and reinforcing these concepts with the community and will be ready for the next step—how to apply this knowledge to improve their diet. I was also able to make four home visits and interview the families in those homes to learn about their current food supply and the issues they face in obtaining enough food to feed their families each day. What I learned will help us determine how to help them improve their food supply.



FURTHER NEEDS

Most of the people in Timo had little food available because they have few ways to preserve food, and they have used

up their food from the last growing season. I asked if they ever have food from their garden go bad before they eat it—they admitted that they do. They do not have ways to preserve much of their food. When I asked what they preserve they told me they dry beans and corn on the cob. The dried corn still on the cob is hung in trees to keep it away from rodents.

People still had to wait a long time to get into education, and the old and weak were still passed up because of healthy people who were crowding into the education station to get shoes and hygiene kits. Sometimes the people who need to see the doctors the most wait all day in the sun and get turned away when the clinic closes because they are in the back of the line.

Because everyone in the organization is a volunteer and have other priorities, some changes happen a little more slowly. Also, we don't always have continuity of personnel and there is a learning curve for some expedition members who are on their first trip to Timo.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to continue the drip-garden project until every family plants a garden at least twice a year. Preserving the food they grow is the next step. Without electricity, they cannot rely on refrigeration. Solar food dryers may be the best solution, as they should be cheap to build and sunlight is abundant. We'll have to talk to some preservation experts about how to deal with the humidity. I also think that we should consider using solar power to cook—like the solar oven we saw at the Foyer de Sion orphanage in Haiti. Solar power would be sustainable and help preserve trees. We would need to explore the feasibility and acceptance of solar food dryers and solar ovens in Timo.

We need to find a way to more effectively triage patients who come to the clinic. So many of those who come are healthy and are just there to see an American doctor and to get the supplies that are provided in the education station. I suggest that we have some nurses to triage the people, who are waiting for education, in order to identify those who have more serious medical or dental needs and get them into the clinic as soon as possible. The nutrition team needs to continue to work with the agriculture team and Renaud Thomas, Timo native and agronomy student, to determine the best crops to grow in order to improve the nutritional value of their diet. The next phase of our nutrition education needs to focus on how to help the people apply the nutrition principles



they've learned.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

This was my second time in Timo and I was able to see how, this time, HHI's interventions built upon what we did the time before. I was very impressed by the progress that has been made in the areas of water and agriculture. The people seem healthier and are eager to learn and progress. The local Fond Paysans Fond'Oies (FPF) organization was having some disagreements that I've seen in organizations that are maturing—it kind of made me chuckle.

I believe that our intervention was on target and was the appropriate next step to take. Teaching basic nutrition will set the stage for the people to understand why they need to vary their diet more and learn how to preserve food. Setting up a separate area for education and having the education occur before the people went to the clinic worked very well.

I'm very impressed by how well we learn from each expedition and improve the next time. We need to continue to be flexible and creative and keep our focus on improving the health and self-reliance of the population.

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