

Vitamin Angel Alliance: Saving Lives Through Better Nutrition

Within 10 days after Katrina decimated New Orleans and much of the Gulf region, trucks loaded with multivitamins headed south, thanks to Howard Schiffer and the Vitamin Angel Alliance, the organization he founded to bring life-sustaining nutritional products to people ravaged by disaster, war, and poverty.

Since 1994, Mr. Schiffer and his international network of supplement industry allies, medical advisors and relief agency liaisons have been bringing vitamins to undernourished families in India, Guatemala, Honduras, Tibet, Bali, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Niger, Sri Lanka, and most recently New Orleans and Pakistan. Last year, the organization provided more than 23 million supplements to people in 40 countries worldwide.

"Our mandate is to get good basic nutritional products to people with the greatest need and the fewest resources to meet those needs," Mr. Schiffer told *Holistic Primary Care* in early October, between phone calls arranging shipments to earthquake-shattered regions of Pakistan.

"In Pakistan right now, as in other disaster zones, they're dropping in flour, rice, and powdered milk. That will keep people from starving, but there's little nutritional value in it. If you can get some multivitamins in there, the people will have a chance."

Mr. Schiffer, a former supplement industry executive, began Vitamin Angels after 1994's North Ridge earthquake in Southern California. "I got a call from a relief agency. They were able to get medical supplies into the most affected areas, but they were worried about infectious disease, opportunistic infections and other problems that accompany poor nutrition. They asked if I knew how they could get nutritional products." He called on a friend and colleague, Ed Davis, who ran a company called Nutrition Headquarters, in Illinois. Within 3 days, trucks showed up with pallets of multivitamins. Mr. Schiffer realized he'd found a true calling.

"In its early days, the nutrition industry was full of people who were really living the lifestyle, committed to the idea that nutritional products could make a difference in the world. I realized we could probably do a lot more outside the US than inside. The need out there is so great."

According to the World Health Organization, the number one risk factor for premature death worldwide is lack of food. "It is bigger than AIDS, cancer or heart disease. People where we work are literally starving to death," he said.

"Providing multivitamins is the single most important medical intervention we can make," said Nancy Harris, MD, an internist who directs the Terma Foundation (www.terma.org), an independent aid organization providing basic nutrition and sustainable health care to people in some of the poorest regions of Tibet for the last 15 years. Dr. Harris works closely with Mr. Schiffer and Vitamin Angels, which provides Terma with the vitamins the group is distributing in Tibet.



Tsunami refugee children in India receive vitamins from Vitamin Angel Alliance affiliates.

"It took me a while to understand the nutritional need," said Dr. Harris. "I had a very conventional medical training. We don't learn much about nutrition. When I first got to Tibet, I thought what they needed was more antibiotics, more pharmaceuticals. But we quickly learned that people living in constant stress, upheaval, displacement and trauma are often very malnourished.

"If you really want to make a difference in places like Tibet, you don't need to build more hospitals or bring in expensive technology. Just bring in multivitamins. If we can improve nutritional status, everything gets better: fewer maternal and infant deaths, the kids grow and thrive, people are better able to fight infections."

The latter is particularly important in Tibet these days, as tuberculosis, much of it drug resistant, is sweeping through the countryside, killing thousands. "Extinction of an entire culture from malnutrition and TB is inexcusable when we have inexpensive treatments to prevent it. I can't stand by and allow this to happen on my watch," said Dr. Harris. "If we don't do this, no one else will. Unfortunately, starving, sick women and children are never on the top of the priority list for any government." (To read more about Dr. Harris and Terma's work in Tibet, visit www.holisticprimarycare.net, or Terma's website at: www.terma.org.)

Though the tasks seem insurmountable and the demands only seem to increase, small organizations like Vitamin Angels, Terma, Physicians Without Borders and others accomplish tremendous good, often more quickly than larger organizations or government agencies. "We're able to thread the eye of the needle," said Dr. Harris.

In domestic crises, such as Katrina, Vitamin Angels can usually reach target sites within 14 days, Mr. Schiffer said. International responses typically take longer, but the Angels are usually in the breach anywhere in the world within a month. "A bottle of vitamins is an amazing vehicle for getting nutrients to people." To learn more about Vitamin Angels, visit: www.vitaminangel.org.