

# Healing Peru's poorest with diocese's help

This is the third in a series of articles on the missions of the Diocese of Jefferson City. The annual mission collection will be taken up in parishes throughout the diocese the weekend of July 19-20. Please give generously.

## By Mark Saucier

In Peru, if you are poor, you can't afford to get sick. It is as simple as that.

There are state-run hospitals and clinics intended to serve the poor, but they are understaffed and underfunded. To go to one means you lose a day's wages, if you are lucky enough to have a job. You also have to spend money on public transportation and then sit for hours waiting to see a doctor.

When you do get in to see the doctor, you had better be brief and precise. A doctor in a public facility in Lima attends to an average of 16 to 17 patients an hour, which means about three and a half minutes of face time each. This is one of the reasons patients have to go back two or three times before they are able to regain their health.

The Mercy Sisters of Ireland established the Mercy Clinic to fill the void of effective health care for the poor in Lima. Located on

the Rimac River in an inner-city area that includes the old garbage dump of Lima, the clinic offers medical attention that is more personalized, local and affordable to the poor.

According to the director, Mercy Sister Millie McNamara, the clinic is responding to the most common but serious health issues that prevail in the barrios (poor neighborhoods).

"The main problems would be intestinal parasites, bronco-respiratory conditions, acute and chronic diarrhea, and chronic malnutrition," she explained.

Staffed by doctors and medical professionals who donate part of their services, the Mercy Clinic includes a lab, X-ray facilities, an operating room, two intensive-care units and eight hospital beds. It

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***— Sister Millie McNamara***

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routinely provides on-site surgeries including prostate, gall bladder, appendectomies and Caesarean deliveries.

"We serve nearly 100 patients a day, carry out an average of 18 operations

a month, and now have a database of the medical records of 30,000 patients," Sr. Millie said.

The patients served by the clinic are practically all poor; often arriving when their condition has become chronic and they are in urgent need of attention. How-

ever, everyone is expected to contribute toward his or her health care.

The costs of medicines for the most common diseases range from \$12 to \$50. Laboratory analysis and

pre-operative care run from \$50 to \$75. Charges for operations are from \$100 to \$250.

Sr. Millie explained that the costs are well below market rates and made possible through "the subsidies provided and the contribution made by the Mercy Sisters."

From Sr. Millie's perspective, the pharmacy's commercial drugs may be the most important service to clinic patients. It is an alternative to the black market where the poor tend to obtain medicines they can't afford elsewhere.

"These are cheap medicines that may help for a short time, but very soon the disease returns again," she said.

While many are willing to pay some-

thing for the quality of care they receive at the Mercy Clinic, there are others who simply can't afford even nominal charges.

"I was talking to a woman a few days ago who sells potatoes and vegetables in the market," Sr. Millie reported. "She is working with two hernias, the public hospital won't help, and she has no money."

Longtime mission partners in Nasca and Marcona, the Mercy Sisters approached the Diocese of Jefferson City to ask for help in establishing a Medicine Bank to provide free health care to the poorest of the poor of the nearly 200,000 people in the 10 barrios served by the clinic.

The new project,



**Mercy Sister Millie McNamara, director of the Mercy Clinic in Lima, Peru, stands at the door with a patient.**

scheduled to open this month, will offer the complete services of the Mercy Clinic to those who qualify. In order to confine costs and encourage those who can to pay the regular fees, there will be a monthly cap on the number of the various benefits provided by the Medicine Bank.

Each month, the mission grant from the Diocese of Jefferson City will provide 60 medicine packages for the most common ailments; 20 pre-op care packages; and

20 surgeries. Over the course of the year, the Medicine Bank will extend critical care to nearly 1,000 people who are currently receiving no medical attention. It will more than double the number of surgeries performed at the Mercy Clinic.

For Sr. Millie, a registered nurse who has worked in Peru for more than 40 years, the Medicine Bank is a dream come true.

"All I want to do," she confessed, "is to help the very, very poor."

The Medicine

Bank is one of 10 projects currently funded by the July 19-20 collection for the Peru Missions and the Church in Latin America. Contributions to the collection also support ministry in five parishes, the development of radio programs focusing on evangelization and human development, and advocacy for human rights and democracy.

For more information, please visit the diocesan website at [www.diojeffcity.org](http://www.diojeffcity.org) and search "missions."



**Much of the laboratory work can be done on site at the Mercy Clinic.**