Joan Quinlan’s Blog Post from Uganda-February 4, 2013

CCHI leaders Joan Quinlan and Sarah Oo and Dr. Dean Xerras of MGH Chelsea HealthCare Center are in Uganda on a trip sponsored by the MGH Center for Global Health. The CCHI staff will visit the Mbarara University of Science and Technology and the Bugoye Community Health Center to observe community health work on the ground in Uganda and to teach on aspects of community health work from Chelsea and CCHI.

Hello all,

We traveled two days and arrived yesterday afternoon in Mbarra, Uganda. The drive was more than 200 miles, at least half of which was over washed-out and incredibly bumpy roads. Driving is one of the highest risk behaviors in Uganda! - although we were in good hands with our driver, Lucas. What struck us along the way, besides the devastating poverty, were the series of social marketing campaigns aimed at changing health behaviors. We saw huge billboards about domestic violence (peace at home), promoting condom use (if you are the cheater...if someone is cheating on you...), and another on health care as a right. I will do my best to bring back photos.

Today was an amazing day. We started with a tour of the Mbarrara Hospital. We saw tens and tens of people waiting in line at the HIV clinic. On the inpatient medical ward, patients were on mats in the hallway. Their families must bring their food and bedding. There is not enough medicine for everyone who needs it and it is up to the patients to pay for it, although staff members make valiant attempts to help. We then visited a pediatric ward and saw children with malaria and suffering from malnutrition. Thank you to Dr. Tony Wilson, chief of internal medicine, for the tour.
Next we met with the leaders of the public health program at the Mbarrara University of Science and Technology (MUST). I worried that we would have nothing in common, but within minutes it was clear that we spoke the same language. They are all about empowering communities and were fascinated to learn that - despite the high tech medicine available at MGH - there are still great social and economic inequities and disparities in health status. We then had the privilege of joining home visitors working on a study of the effectiveness of using high tech gizmos that send a signal to the hospital every day when, and if, they open their HIV pill box. I went way back into the country and visited a family living in a mud house without electricity and running water. They were incredibly gracious and all wanted their photos taken.

Tomorrow, I give a talk to the public health faculty and students, and then we take off for four days in a rural village. I am not sure how reliable the internet will be there, but will keep in touch if possible. Sarah Oo and Dean Xerras send their regards. We are so grateful for this opportunity.