



Taking Aim at Infant AIDS

Rotarian Stephen Nicholas, a pioneering pediatric AIDS specialist who helped drastically reduce infant HIV in New York City, is using Rotary as a catalyst for wiping out mother-to-child HIV transmission in the Dominican Republic.

In the early 1990s, New York City had the highest birth rate of HIV-infected children in the United States. Since 2000, only one baby in that city has been born with the virus, says Nicholas, a member of the Rotary Club of Yonkers. Similar trends are appearing throughout the United States, he adds.

This sharp drop in mother-to-child HIV transmission has largely resulted from improvements in drug treatments as well as aggressive intervention during pregnancy through testing and education. Nicholas and his colleagues pioneered this multipronged approach while he was the director of pediatrics at Harlem Hospital Center.

“For me, the moral equation changed when I realized that infant AIDS was disappearing in the United States,” says Nicholas, founder and director of Columbia University’s International Family AIDS Program. “With a world filled with HIV/AIDS, I felt for the first time obligated to get involved internationally.”

In 1999, Nicholas began a family AIDS clinic in La Romana, Dominican Republic, a province with one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates outside sub-Saharan Africa. Run by the International Family AIDS Program, the clinic provides direct care and treatment for pregnant women with HIV.

To expand the International Family AIDS Program and keep it sustainable, the Yonkers club, along with the Rotary Club of La Romana and District 7230 (New York), launched the Mother-Baby AIDS Project in the Dominican Republic in 2006.

With help from a US\$50,000 World Community Service Project Grant, the project is benefiting more than 100 HIV-infected mothers and their newborn babies each year. Infected mothers continue to receive AIDS treatment after the births to protect children from being orphaned.

The clinic has lowered the rate of mother-to-child HIV transmission in the La Romana province from 40 percent to less than 1 percent, Nicholas says.

“Rotary’s involvement allows this project to serve as a global success model and help lead other international endeavors,” he says. “Our goal is to eliminate or greatly reduce pediatric AIDS and AIDS orphans over the next decade.”