

Rheumatology for All in East Africa

By Carol A. Hitchon, MD, FRCPC, MSc; and Rosie Scuccimarri, MD, FRCPC

Access to rheumatology care varies globally but is particularly limited in resource-poor countries such as those in East Africa. In these regions, there are few or no rheumatologists to provide rheumatology specialty care. Rheumatology education to medical trainees is often limited, with only limited rheumatology infrastructure and issues with access to diagnostic testing and medications.

In 2016, following a visit to the rheumatology clinic of Tikur Anbessa Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, our group established “Rheumatology for All” (RFA) (rheumatologyforall.org), an American-based registered charity whose mission is to increase access to rheumatology care in under-resourced regions. We have adopted a “train-the-trainer” approach in order to create self-sustaining rheumatology units. This has been done by 1) funding the education of local physicians to become rheumatologists; and 2) providing educational programs to the local residents until this can be provided by the returning rheumatologist. All programs are conducted with the full support and collaboration of local medical faculties.

Fellowship support: Our initiatives started in Ethiopia, a country of nearly 115 million people previously without a practicing rheumatologist. RFA funded a two-year rheumatology fellowship for two internists who completed this training at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, in Durban, South Africa, in 2021. Drs. Birhanu Demelash Desyibelew and Becky Abera Adugna are now affiliated with Addis Ababa University and have established busy rheumatology practices seeing more than 150 patients weekly, are contributing to rheumatology clinical education for medical trainees in Addis Ababa and are supervising several trainee research projects. Their success was recently highlighted by their Internal Medicine Department, when the rheumatology unit was recognized for its excellence in clinical services and resident education. This is outstanding considering that there were no rheumatology services at Tikur Anbessa Hospital before 2021. RFA, through charitable donations, is now also able to fund a pediatric rheumatology fellowship for Dr. Hanna Lishan who will start training in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2023. Dr. Hanna Lishan will join Drs. Desyibelew and Adugna in providing rheumatology clinical care and advocating for rheumatology resources for Ethiopians of all ages.

Rwanda, one of the most densely populated countries with a population greater than 13 million, had no practicing rheumatologist. Rheumatology education and rheumatology clinical care were provided by internists and non-rheumatology specialists. With the full support of



Drs. Birhanu Demelash Desyibelew & Becky Abera Adugna Dr. Hanna Lishan

the Department of Medicine in Kigali, we have recently obtained funding from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons (RCPS) through the International Development Aid and Collaboration program, to provide rheumatology subspecialty training for Dr. Jean Paul Basbose, who will be starting his adult rheumatology fellowship in 2023. Our group will continue to support and provide mentorship to these new rheumatologists as they advance their clinical and academic careers.

In addition to funding fellowship training, we have developed a rheumatology curriculum that can be provided in person or virtually to trainees in resource-limited regions. In 2018, visiting professors from Canada and the U.S. provided an intensive rheumatology program to senior internal medicine residents in Addis Ababa. The visiting rheumatologists provided lectures and clinical skills training. The participating residents also gave presentations, thereby developing their skills to teach their junior colleagues. A virtual adaptation of the visiting professor program (due to COVID-19) was continued until the return of Drs. Desyibelew and Adugna.

In 2021, at the request of the University of Kigali Medical School in Rwanda, we developed an expanded 16-week virtual rheumatology program for second-year internal medicine residents. The lectures and interactive tutorials were provided virtually, in English, by an international faculty with representation from Africa, the U.K., the U.S. and Canada, thereby ensuring culturally and regionally relevant content. Lectures and tutorials were supplemented with clinical skills videos. The course was repeated in 2022 and 2023. Resident feed-

The Latest from Arthritis Society Canada: New Gout Hub and Early Diagnosis Campaign

By Trish Barbato, President and CEO, Arthritis Society Canada

Arthritis Society Canada is constantly updating resources with the latest evidence, and reaching out to educate the public about Canada's most common chronic disease.

Please check out and share our newest resource — a new hub all about the symptoms, causes and treatment of gout at www.arthritis.ca/gout. Here we explain that gout is the most common form of inflammatory arthritis, affecting as many as 1 million Canadians, and help people manage it with up-to-date info on risk factors for gout, tips for self-management of gout and online learning guides on everything from staying active to eating well.

Also new on the market is our campaign designed to help people with common joint symptoms ask themselves, could it be arthritis? With digital ads across Canada this spring, we are encouraging people to check their symptoms online to learn more.

Our message to those at risk is that it's better to know because early diagnosis and treatment of arthritis are critical to minimizing the impact of joint damage and disability.

If people have joint pain, they shouldn't ignore it. Millions live with arthritis, and there are millions more who have this disease but don't know it yet. Understanding their symptoms is the first step to finding relief.

An advertisement for Arthritis Society Canada's "Better To Know" campaign. It features a photograph of a woman in a blue polka-dot shirt holding her neck in pain. To the right of the photo, the text reads: "Your aching joints are telling you something. Is it arthritis? It's better to know." Below this text is a blue checkmark icon inside a white square. At the bottom of the ad, the Arthritis Society Canada logo is on the left, and the text "Check your symptoms at arthritis.ca/BetterToKnow" is on the right.

Your aching joints are telling you something.

Is it arthritis?

It's better to know.

Arthritis SOCIETY CANADA

Check your symptoms at arthritis.ca/BetterToKnow

Anyone in Canada can take the Arthritis Symptom Checker at www.arthritis.ca/BetterToKnow.

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back was positive, although most participants requested in-person teaching, especially for clinical skills. Thus, in 2023, to supplement the virtual teaching, Drs. Hitchon, Scuccimarri, Colmegna, and Meltzer have planned an in-person visit to provide clinical skills teaching and tutorials for both internal medicine and pediatric resident trainees.

The combined approach of supporting funding for fellowship training and providing rheumatology educational programs to medical and pediatric residents in under-resourced regions aims to develop sustainable rheumatology capacity for clinical care and education, and thereby improve outcomes for individuals with rheumatic diseases in these regions. This work could not be possible without the generous support of our donors, the

project-specific funding from organizations such as the RCPSC, and the commitment of our volunteers, all of which are important to help achieve the mission of RFA.

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