VISITATION REPORT

A Difficult Ending to a Challenging Year

EugeneBell's 2016 autumn visit to the DPR of Korea (North Korea) was delayed one month. As a result, our delegation did not arrive until November 22nd. For the next three weeks our delegation, together with a dedicated team from the Ministry of Public Health, braved bitter winter weather to visit all twelve of our treatment centers in the western half of the country. At each site we were joined by local caregivers and performed a multitude of vital tasks, including collecting medical samples from each patient, inventorying pharmacies and laboratories, and dropping off medication and nutritional supplements; all to insure local staff can continue caring for our patients for another six months.

From our beginning in 2008 with the enrollment of nineteen patients, EugeneBell's MDR-TB program grew until annual enrollment of new patients reached more than 1,000 in 2015. This year, because our delegations were unable to make regularly-scheduled visits, we were able to enroll only half of the new patients we had planned for 2016. This is not good news as approximately 4,000 to 5,000 North Koreans are infected with MDR-TB each year. Unless annual new patient enrollment reaches at least 4,000, the total number of persons with MDR-TB will continue to increase.

But despite our set-back in 2016, we have reason to hope that we can eventually reach our goal of providing treatment for all North Korean MDR-TB sufferers. Enthusiasm for our program continues to grow, not only among patients and local caregivers, but also among North Korea's medical establishment. On this visit we were assured by the Ministry of Health that from now on, our delegations will be provided with the regular visit schedule we need to do our work effectively. To insure our schedule avoids times of the year when tensions are highest, we were asked to begin our visits during the first week of May and November, instead of the middle of April and October.

Interest in our program has increased elsewhere as well. More and more, government officials in the Republic of Korea and the United States are beginning to recognize that our fight to prevent a multidrug-resistant tuberculosis epidemic in North Korea should be exempted from all sanctions-related restrictions.

Thank you for your partnership in this work. Your continued interest in helping North Korean MDR-TB sufferers will help us reach more people whose lives are threatened by this deadly disease.