

# Retired Warkworth physician looks back on "a great life" of service

by John Campbell  
THE INDEPENDENT

**D**R. ROBERT STEPHENS considers himself blessed. A devout Christian, he praises God for having given him health, strength and myriad opportunities to use his medical skills to help people less fortunate around the world.

The thousands he has helped would say they have been blessed by Dr. Stephens, beginning in 1948 with the aboriginal people he treated while filling in for a physician in the coastal village of Bella Bella in British Columbia. The three-month assignment was "quite a challenge" for the neophyte who had just completed his internship at Toronto Western Hospital. His train trip out west began the same day he got married to Ruth Petrie, a nurse. The two, who met as high school students in Toronto, remained married until Ms. Stephens' death last year.



In 1950 the couple travelled to the Congo, to build a hospital in the north-eastern part of the impoverished country with funding supplied by their church.

"It was partly my Christian conviction that I should help others: Love your neighbour as yourself - a practical outreach to help the poor and oppressed," he says. It was

also an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather who had been a missionary in China in the late 1800s.

"There wasn't anything in the way of health care," Dr. Stephens, 83, says, apart from a small dispensary. There was no electricity and the only running water, he jokes, was provided by the Africans who "ran from the spring to the house." For the first five years he was the only physician.

Ten years after the couple's arrival the village of Nyankunde had a 100-bed hospital with medical, surgical, pediatric and obstetrical divisions, and four satellite clinics. The outpatient department averaged 500 visits per day. They also established training facilities for nurses and midwives.

For some patients, payment was based on the going rate for a witch doctor's services. The price of a chicken bought the person a month's treatment.

In the late 1950s, storm clouds began to appear. As he recalls in a brief history of his life he wrote four years ago, entitled *Climbing*, "a wave of anti-colonialism swept over Africa coupled with a drive toward independence."

While Dr. Stephens, his wife and their two children were in Canada on a scheduled furlough, Congo declared its independence from Belgium. Fighting broke out and missionaries were forced to flee the country.

"They say two million people have been killed in the fighting since," Dr. Stephens says.

The hospital continued to function in his absence and eventually grew to 200 beds but in 2002 it and the surrounding community were attacked by 5,000 warriors whose tribe was a longstanding enemy of the tribe that lived in the area and worked at the hospital.

Two thousand people were slaughtered and the hospital was destroyed. He cried when he heard the



At left, Dr. Robert Stephens wears two medals he was given recently, one from the federal government to signify his appointment to the Order of Canada, the other from his alma mater, the University of Toronto, to recognize his 60 years of post-graduate medical service. Above, Dr. Stephens sits at his desk in his Warkworth residence.

tragic news.

Following his return to Canada, Dr. Stephens established a practice in Toronto but it wasn't long before he became director of the Missionary Health Institute and launched an international medical service to assist those working overseas. He and his wife bought a farm property near Warkworth to entertain foreign university students they met through Ms. Stephens' involvement as a member of the board of the International Student Centre.

The connection to this area ultimately led to Dr. Stephens setting up a family practice in Campbellford in 1977 with his son-in-law, Dr. Robert Henderson, now the chief of staff at Campbellford Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Stephens retired from the practice in 1990 to become the full-time execu-

tive director of both the Christian Medical and Dental Society of Canada (CMDS) and the Evangelical Medical Aid Society (EMAS).

His work with EMAS took him frequently overseas, sometimes for administrative purposes, more often to participate in short-term missions with medical colleagues.

He's made 14 trips to China where EMAS has established seven hospitals. On his last trip there, in August 2000 he was made an honorary citizen of Haiyuan county for his contributions to installing a system to supply clean water.

It was through EMAS that Dr. Stephens made his first visit to Cuba in 1991. He has visited the island every year since then, more recently as medical consultant with Health Partners International of

Canada, a charitable humanitarian organization that provides free medical aid with the help of health care companies that donate medicines, vaccines and medical supplies. Physicians headed to other countries are provided with a travel pack containing medicines worth more than \$5,000 wholesale.

"I take Christian beliefs and responsibilities seriously," Dr. Stephens says. "Christians have a lot to share and should share, not only with their belief system, which you could call gospel, but also in practical terms. Christianity is a religion of love - God's love to us and our love for our fellow human beings...I want to share that love in practical ways (and) God's given me the strength, the vision, the will, the health to do that for 60 years."

"It's been a great life," he says. "I certainly en-

joyed having multiple careers. It's been fun."

Last month, he was appointed to the Order of Canada, for the "vital leadership" he demonstrated over the decades in providing health care to people most in need.

It was an "unbelievable" honour, Dr. Stephens says, but he views the award not as recognition of his own lifetime achievements but of all the volunteer work that is being done abroad by Canadians.

Dr. Stephens has received additional tributes since then from his home community. He was the guest of honour at a black-and-white ball held recently in Warkworth and last Friday, the conference and education room in the Campbellford Memorial Health Centre was officially named in his honour by the Trent Hills Family Health Team.