Responding to Urgent Plea for Help, UHealth and Sylvester Teams Send Shipments of Lifesaving Medical Supplies to Grenada

When Chukwuemeka Ikpeazu, Sr., M.D., Ph.D., M.B.A., heard last fall during the COVID-19 Delta surge that Grenada’s major hospital was overwhelmed with cases and running out of masks, gloves, and other vital supplies, he sprang into action.

“More than 100 people were dying every day, and the hospital supply shelves were empty,” said Dr. Ikpeazu, a medical oncologist at Sylvester at Plantation, part of UHealth – University of Miami Health System, and associate professor of medicine at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. “The minister of health contacted me for assistance, and we responded immediately.”

Javier Milian, assistant vice president, oncology satellite operations and recruitment, happened to be at Plantation when the call for help came in. “At Sylvester, we could certainly relate to the challenges of caring for the most vulnerable patient populations during times of COVID peaks. Without adequate supplies, these health care workers and their
patients were at great risk,” said Milian.

Milian contacted Vincent Torres, emergency management director for UHealth and the Miller School of Medicine, and Barth Green, M.D., professor and executive dean for global health and community service at UHealth, notifying them that Sylvester was working with contacts in Grenada and that the entire country had dangerously low stores of medical equipment, surgical supplies, and basic personal protective equipment.

UHealth Emergency Management worked with the Miller School’s Global Institute, which engaged with the island nation’s Ministry of Health and Social Security, which in turn formally requested the University's assistance. The Global Institute team then secured the help of nongovernmental organization Direct Relief International (DRI) to coordinate resources and logistics. DRI contributed thousands of pounds of medical supplies and funded their shipment to Grenada.

As a result, Grenada General Hospital was able to resume caring for patients with serious COVID-19 symptoms. “I was overwhelmed by the great response from our appeal,” said Dr. Ikpeazu. “The leaders of this small Caribbean nation were very grateful for our life-saving support.”

Invitation and Visit with Prime Minister

Several months later, the Right Honorable Dr. Keith Mitchell, prime minister of Grenada, invited Dr. Ikpeazu to come to the island in February to receive a personal thank-you for the University of Miami’s support. Before leaving on that visit, Dr. Ikpeazu personally organized a second collection of 300 pounds of supplies, including masks and gloves donated by
Sylvester’s teams at Plantation and Deerfield Beach.

“We have an unwavering commitment to care for our community,” added Milian. “It’s this same principle that has driven the expansion of seven satellite campuses (and two more under construction), only this time the community was a little further away.”

On February 11, Dr. Ikpeazu arrived in Grenada, where he was greeted by the prime minister, who put his hands on his chest to express his heartfelt appreciation. “It was a very moving moment for everyone,” said Dr. Ikpeazu.

Outreach and Support Mission in Grenada

After touring the hospital, Dr. Ikpeazu spent a week on Grenada, traveling through all six parishes with a health care team led by a local physician. “We did everything from blood pressure assessments to chronic disease screening, as well as visiting several nursing homes and bringing them supplies,” he said. “I provided advice and support rather than treating patients.”

For instance, Dr. Ikpeazu provided nutritional advice to a woman with metastatic breast cancer and helped a fisherman whose stroke prevented him from continuing his trade. “We organized a small shop in the front of the house he had built so that he could provide for his family,” said Dr. Ikpeazu. “We stocked it with snack foods and drinks so he would have an
opportunity to maintain his independence.”

Reflecting on his medical mission trip, Dr. Ikpeazu said it was a reminder of the close ties between Miami and the Caribbean and Latin America. “All of us in the medical community need to be very sensitive to the health care issues in those countries and be ready to respond in case of need,” he said. “Our support can make a tremendous difference for patients and families throughout the region.”