



# grace!

WINTER 2006

AT WORK IN HAITI & THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

## Bi-national TB Initiative: A Bridge to Collaboration on Hispaniola

**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

Colossians 3:13-14 (NIV)

Tuberculosis is one of the leading public health problems facing both Haiti and the Dominican Republic today. Tuberculosis, or TB, is a bacterial disease which is spread through the air when a person infected with active TB coughs or sneezes. The tuberculosis bacteria most commonly attacks the lungs, but can also affect many other parts of the body. Left untreated, tuberculosis is often fatal.

Once a leading cause of death in North America, with the help of antibiotics, TB has become relatively rare in developed countries. Unfortunately, tuberculosis is still common in many developing countries. Even with advances in modern medical science, TB causes more deaths worldwide – approximately 2 million per year according to the World Health Organization than any other infectious disease. Poverty-stricken people suffering from malnutrition and poor general health are more susceptible to tuberculosis. This is especially true for people living with HIV/AIDS, who are less able to fight off the disease because of their weakened immune systems. Overcrowded living conditions also contribute to the spread of TB. Haiti has the highest incidence of tuberculosis in the western hemisphere and the Dominican Republic is not far behind.

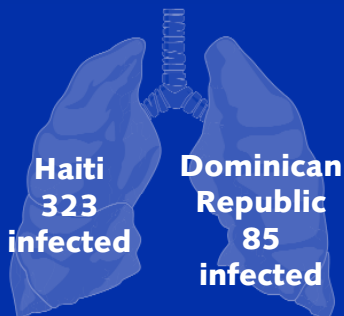


**Dr Beatrice Bonnevaux, Representative of WHO/PAHO in Haiti; Dr Josette Bijou, Minister of the Public Health and the Population in Haiti; Dr Sabino Baez Garcia, Secretary of State at the Public Health and the Social Services; and Dr Socorro Gross Representative of the WHO/PAHO in the Dominican Republic met in July in support of the bi-national TB initiative.**

Established national tuberculosis programs already exist in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic and are demonstrating positive results in the war against TB. Since the mid 1970s, International Child Care has had a leading role in the prevention and cure of tuberculosis in Haiti. ICC supports a national network of clinics and tuberculosis control efforts throughout five of the ten geographic departments of the country. Through partnerships with organizations including the Haitian Ministry of Health, World Health Organization, U.S. Agency for International Development and Canadian International Development Agency, International Child Care supports TB services for over 5,000,000 people. ICC distributes drugs, monitors cure rates, provides training and technical assistance and facilitates program planning and coordination to a network of 149 rural and urban clinics throughout Haiti. Despite the gains being made in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic

## TB Statistics

**Annual Incidence Rate (all forms)**



**per 100,000 individuals**

World Health Organization 2005

through national TB programs, public health leaders in both countries recognize that the prevention and cure of tuberculosis can only occur if they commit to an island-wide initiative. The significant flow of people in both directions across the Haiti – Dominican Republic border each year makes partnership imperative. Although there is little historical precedent for effective cross-border collaboration between the two countries, key international health agencies are working together to develop a plan for joint tuberculosis control activities. International Child Care has already been identified as the lead agency responsible for cross-border collaboration in Haiti. In

the Dominican Republic, Family Health International has been appointed this task.

The strategic importance of this bi-national initiative for both Haiti and the Dominican Republic is considerable. This plan will not only contribute to improving TB control island-wide, but it could also serve as a bridge for future health initiatives that are of mutual concern to both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, particularly HIV/AIDS. Project leaders are hopeful that the bi-national TB initiative will be the beginning of a renewed spirit of cooperation across the island of Hispaniola. ●

## Divided Past...Shared Future? A Short History of the Island of Hispaniola

Although Haiti and the Dominican Republic both share the same island—Hispaniola—the two countries have surprisingly different, but closely interwoven, histories. The island first became known to the western world when Columbus landed there in 1492, though it had been home to the native Arawak and Carib peoples for many years before that. Meanwhile, French and British buccaneers made use of the northern and western shores as ports (hence the infamous “pirates of the Caribbean”). As time passed and power changed hands many times, Haitians became bound to the fortunes of the French, while the Dominican people were more heavily influenced by Spain. This divergence is most evident today in the countries’ languages; Haitians primarily speak Creole and French, while most Dominicans speak Spanish. The colonizing countries took different approaches to their “prize,” however, and while France enthusiastically took advantage of Haiti’s abundant resources to create a booming export business, Spain was more focused on interests elsewhere and for the most part, left the settlers to their own devices.

The geography of Hispaniola also contributed to the evolution of two distinct cultures. The Dominican side, with its long valleys and wide plains, was better suited to vast sugar cane and tobacco plantations, while the more mountainous Haitian territory was valued for its forests and rich topsoil. Capitalizing on these natural resources, the French imported African slaves to work their sugar cane plantations. When the slaves organized themselves and revolted against the French in 1804, Haiti became the world’s first black republic and the second

nation in the western hemisphere (after the United States) to win its independence. This was not the end of Hispaniola’s many power shifts, and throughout its colorful history, parts of the island have been variously controlled at one time or another by the native Arawak people, the Spanish, the French, the Haitian slaves, the Haitian elite, the Dominicans, and American and U.N. military forces.

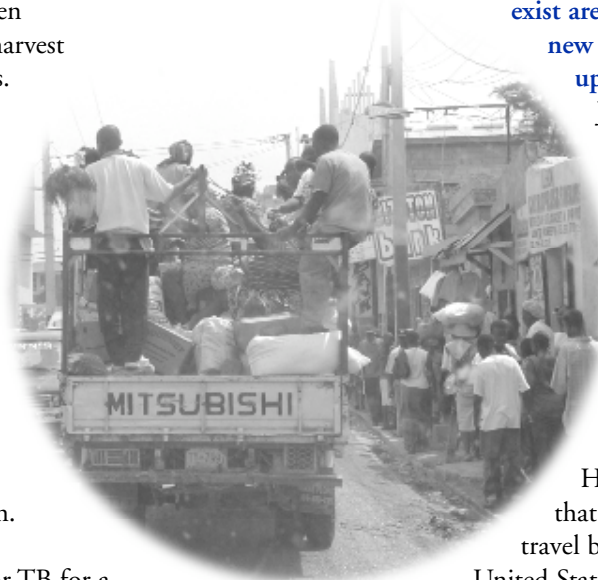
Despite the many differences, there are a number of similarities. Both countries have had political and economic unrest over the years and have suffered under the rule of ruthless dictators. Poverty remains widespread among both peoples. The United States has invaded and occupied each country at least once in its history. Catholicism is the primary religion for Haitians and Dominicans, although people on both sides of the border have incorporated aspects of spirit faiths, like voodoo and santeria, into their Catholic practices. There is a long history of tension and struggle between the two neighbors, and wars and atrocities are unfortunately frequent throughout their shared history. In today’s world, both are considered developing countries, though the Dominicans in recent years have been able to hold free and fair elections to form a stable, democratic government, an accomplishment Haiti still hopes and strives for.



Without question, the island of Hispaniola has a fascinating and, at times, heartbreaking history. New efforts at cooperation like the bi-national TB initiative could be a major step toward healing some of the divisions of the past and moving toward a more united future. ●

# An Epidemic on the Move

One of the most compelling reasons behind the bi-national TB initiative is the significant flow of people across the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. By far the largest movement is Haitians who migrate to the Dominican Republic in search of work, motivated by the abysmal economic conditions throughout most of Haiti. This practice began early in the island's history when Haitian workers were brought in to harvest sugar cane on Dominican plantations. Now, some migrate seasonally across the border as work is available, but most move with the intention of staying permanently. Though there is a large concentration of migrants along the border, Haitians can be found scattered throughout the D.R. and are typically concentrated in batayes (communities of migrant workers) or in sectors of the Dominican economy that depend on or prefer migrant labor, such as construction, agriculture, and tourism.



Migrant people are at a higher risk for TB for a number of reasons. Many of them are poor and suffering from malnutrition, and their transient lifestyles mean that few have been able to complete much education. Basic health care services are difficult for them to obtain, and even when clinics are available, some migrants avoid using them for fear that their illegal status will lead to deportation. Compounding the TB epidemic is the ever-increasing prevalence of HIV, since at least one in three people with HIV will develop TB.

The movement of people across the border makes it extremely difficult for both countries to accurately treat and track TB patients. A person who is diagnosed and begins treatment on one side usually abandons their unfinished treatment once they move. This creates a new and even deadlier problem: multi-drug resistant tuberculosis, a strain of the disease that is resistant

to one or more of the small handful of antibiotics effective in combating TB. People infected with multi-drug resistant TB are much more difficult and expensive to treat, and what's worse, they will infect others with the resistant strain. **Since every untreated case of TB infects an estimated fifteen more people each year and only about half the cases that exist are even reported, it is evident that finding new and better ways to monitor and follow up with TB patients is vital.** In fact, Dr. John Yates, who is a former director of ICC-Haiti and the current ICC consultant to the bi-national project, emphasized, "If we can't do a better job of tracking people while they move, it's almost better not to start treatment than to start and then have them stop."

Lest North Americans think that the problem of TB is limited to the island of Hispaniola, it is important to remember that thousands of Haitians and Dominicans travel back and forth from the island to the United States, Canada, France, and other parts of the world each year. It is truly an international issue, and in the best interests of everyone to work towards reducing the spread of the disease. "Haiti could become a major exporter of TB if we don't do a better job of control," says Dr. Yates. This is one reason why so many national and international health organizations like the World Health Organization, United States Agency for International Development, and Canadian International Development Agency have agreed to partner with Haiti and the Dominican Republic to invest significant resources in this project.

The bi-national TB initiative will work to serve these often forgotten groups of migrant people and, in doing so, stem the flow of this rapidly-spreading disease on the island of Hispaniola and around the world. ●

## Who is a Migrant?

- May be from either country, but most come to the Dominican Republic from Haiti in search of a better life
- Some move back and forth seasonally depending on their jobs, but most migrate permanently
- Work low-paying jobs in areas others won't, like construction, farm labor, factories, and tourism
- Usually poor and malnourished
- Most have not been given the opportunity to get an education, especially children of migrants who have moved frequently
- Few have access to adequate health care services
- Many live in fear of deportation if their illegal status is discovered
- Higher rates of HIV in the population make migrants even more susceptible to TB

# Tuberculosis: Not Just a Disease of the Lungs



**Bienvenue Thelusma is currently being treated for Pott's Disease, a form of tuberculosis, at Grace Children's Hospital.**

Bienvenue Thelusma, a patient at Grace Children's Hospital, suffers from Pott's disease, a type of tuberculosis that affects the spine. Although TB spreads from person to person through the lungs, it can travel to any organ or structure of the body. The vertebrae are the most often afflicted sites, second only to pulmonary (lung) TB. Pott's disease is characterized by a softening and collapse of the vertebrae, often resulting in curvature of the spine or a hunchback deformity. Occasionally, the spinal nerves are also affected and paralysis may result.

People affected with Pott's disease complain of back pain, fever and weight loss. Like Bienvenue, who stiffly holds his neck to the side, patients tend to assume a protective, hunched position. The course of the disease is slow, lasting months or even years.

For many, Pott's disease can be treated with anti-tuberculosis drugs. Depending on the severity of the disease, surgery to correct spinal damage is also an option. Thankfully, Bienvenue's disease was diagnosed early and medication is all he will need to make a full recovery during his stay at Grace.

Controlling the spread of tuberculosis through a bi-national collaboration between Haiti and the Dominican Republic will help prevent the spread of TB in all of its forms. ●

## Newslines –

- Elections in Haiti, which were originally scheduled for fall of 2005, have been postponed until January 2006 with run offs in February. Meanwhile, Haitians continue to endure unrest, sometimes violent. The hope is that once a new president is elected the situation in Haiti will stabilize.
- The relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic continues to be strained. In mid-December a visit to Haiti by Dominican president Leonel Fernandez prompted protests from Haitians who are enraged by the treatment of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic. Though President Fernandez pledged to act to prevent such abuses, he will continue to enforce mass deportation of illegal migrants.

**Please continue to hold our Haitian and Dominican staff in your prayers as they persevere in their work in the midst of unrest and uncertainty.**

### Further Reading

If you are interested in learning more about Hispaniola's history, here are some suggested books on the topic:

*The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat. This novel by Haitian-American author Danticat tells the story of a Haitian orphan growing up on a Dominican plantation in the 1930s. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, also by the same author, is a fictional account of a Haitian girl who moves to New York and learns more than she wants to about her family's troubled past.

*Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder. This book is a biography of American doctor Paul Farmer and his quest for better health care in Haiti and around the world. It takes the reader on fascinating journeys as the author, Tracy Kidder, travels extensively with Dr. Farmer from Boston to Haiti to Russia and beyond, searching for effective ways to treat and prevent TB and other diseases that heavily impact the poor.

*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond. *Collapse* is a historical analysis of several societies, both ancient and modern, and some of the factors that contributed to their ultimate survival or demise. Of particular interest is the chapter on the parallel but divergent histories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and Diamond's assertions about why they are so different today. ●



*Grace!* is published quarterly for friends of International Child Care. ICC is a Christian health agency working in Haiti and the Dominican Republic to change conditions which make people sick, hungry, unemployed and afraid.

ICC depends on individuals, churches, and donor agencies for the financial means to serve. A response card and envelope are enclosed for your contributions. Your gift will be received for income tax purposes.

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