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Napa doctor brings relief to sick in Africa

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When Dr. Eric Grigsby of Napa learned about the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance, he decided to become a part of their mission.

Grigsby, who specializes in pain management and end of life care, left for Malawi, Africa in early July, and spent four weeks caring for HIV and AIDS patients and educating caregivers about the disease. The trip was Grigsby's first to sub-Saharan Africa.

Grigsby said that the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance — a San Francisco-based organization — works with religious organizations in Third World countries to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS and care for those with the disease.

Grigsby said Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world and it has next to no natural resources. Approximately 98 percent of its people live without electricity, he said, adding that the majority of Malawi's people reside in villages, with several of a family's generations typically living under one roof.

"They have no public health system," said Grigsby. The country has approximately a million orphans — children who have lost both of their parents to AIDS, he said.

Most adults living in Malawi can expect to live to age 41 and of the country's population of nearly 13 million people, about 940,000 have HIV, according to the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance's Web site.

"There is no morphine or valium available. Everyone dies in village homes with no pain relief," Grigsby said.

AIDS makes patients more susceptible to several types of cancers and tuberculosis; malaria is also widespread in Malawi, he said.

During his stay in Malawi, Grigsby made routine trips to villages to examine AIDS patients and administer what little morphine, cortisone and other drugs were available, he said.

He also met with Malawi's Minister of Health, Marjorie Ngaunje, to discuss how to better use the country's funds and resources to expand AIDS treatments and pain management. In addition, Grigsby traveled to district and church-based hospitals, giving informational lectures to clinical staff.

Grigsby said while he was in Malawi, he met a man who has HIV and lost both of his parents to



Dr. Eric Grigsby of Napa plays with a local boy in Malawi, Africa. Grigsby, who specializes in pain management and end of life care, spent four weeks caring for HIV and AIDS patients in Malawi. Marie Arago photo

AIDS. The man runs a day care center for orphans left behind after their mothers and fathers died of the disease — with an annual budget of just \$1,000, Grigsby said.

In a country where AIDS has reached epidemic proportions, Grigsby said, Malawi has only eight palliative care specialists — doctors specializing in end-of-life care and pain management. The result is that only a fraction of those with HIV and AIDS in Malawi receive anti-viral drugs or painkillers.

"Nobody wants to die alone. Nobody wants to die in pain. In Malawi, that happens all the time," he said.

In a team effort with Malawi's Minister of Health, Grigsby will soon apply for a grant for end of life care for AIDS and cancer patients in Africa, he said. To better serve HIV and AIDS patients in Africa, Grigsby also plans to teach and write a curriculum at a medical school in Blantyre, Malawi, next summer.

"I want people to be aware of these people who deserve to die with dignity. I want people to be aware of palliative care and I really hope those interested in this problem will learn more about it," he said.

Grigsby said Napans interested in helping AIDS patients in Malawi can donate funds to the Margaret Grigsby Foundation, a nonprofit organization Grigsby named after his mother. Donors should specify that funds be distributed to the Palliative Care Association of Malawi and can contact Grigsby's Villa Lane private practice at 252-9660.