

Helping Hands Reach Out

By Alexandra Zendrian

SANTIAGO DE GUAYAQUIL — Changing someone's life forever can happen in minutes. Frequent medical missions in Santiago de Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest and most populous city, allow Homayoun Sasson, MD, chief of plastic surgery at Franklin and Plainview hospitals, to experience this phenomenon first-hand.

For example, in 2009 Dr. Sasson treated a young man whose forehead had a benign tumor that was roughly the size of a tennis ball — and growing. Ostracized by his community, the patient never left home without a hat to cover the growth. During a short surgical procedure, Dr. Sasson removed the tissue and reconstructed the patient's face.

The next year, the same young man visited Dr. Sasson when he returned for another Ecuadoran mission. The former patient expressed his gratitude, telling the doctor how the surgery changed his life. He no longer covered his face and was not afraid to go out in public.

"Making a difference in people's lives in as quickly as 15 minutes — that kind of experience is unmatched," Dr. Sasson said.

Blanca's House, a Long Island group that was founded in 2008, organizes the missions to Santiago de Guayaquil. Dr. Sasson and two other physicians bring their own medical equipment and medications to serve numerous patients. Accompanying them are North Shore-LIJ nurses and residents to administer pre-, intra- and post-operative care. The health system has donated stretchers, beds and other surgical supplies to serve

patients in and around the impoverished city.

"People begin to line up for medical care a day or two before we even arrive," Dr. Sasson said. "Patients come from several miles away — in many cases on foot."

During a week-long medical mission, Dr. Sasson usually



Dr. Sasson usually performs more than 100 procedures on medical missions.

performs more than 100 procedures. He primarily corrects severe facial or cranial deformities, hand deformities and burn damage. He also provides other surgical interventions as needed.

Later this year, Dr. Sasson will lead a similar mission to the Dominican Republic. North Shore-LIJ anesthesiologists, nurses, residents and medical students who want to participate can call Dr. Sasson at 516-487-5017 or visit BlancasHouse.org.

Are You on a Mission?

Do you plan to be? If you have an inspiring medical mission story, please email mconfort@nshs.edu.