

WORLD OF MEDICINE

Mission of transformation

A volunteer surgeon makes a new life possible for Third World patients with spinal deformities

La mariposita—“little butterfly” in Spanish—is the pet name Westchester Medical Center orthopaedic surgeon Andrew Moulton, M.D., has for his wife, Geraldine Collado. So its English equivalent came to mind in 2003, when the couple launched an international medical relief organization. Today the Butterfly Foundation performs corrective spinal surgeries on some of the most difficult cases in the Third World—often children otherwise doomed to a hand-capped existence.

The name fits. “Some of these kids are literally twisted and socially repressed—like a caterpillar in a cocoon, ready to turn into a butterfly,” says Dr. Moulton, who teaches orthopaedic surgery at New York Medical College.

Besides performing pro bono operations, organization members—there’s usually a team of about 30 volunteers on a trip—share cutting-edge knowledge and equipment with surgeons in the countries they visit.

“We try not to do all the surgery ourselves, but instead to find capable people and train them how to perform it,” says Dr. Moulton. “And we leave things like spinal implants behind to make sure they can.”

So far, foundation volunteers have traveled to Collado’s native Dominican Republic, as well as Africa, Jamaica, Chile and, in December 2006, Vietnam. For the last trip, they were invited by Vo Vantanh,

Vietnam’s premier spine surgeon, to participate in the annual Asian Spine Surgery Conference in Ho Chi Minh City. The team of 24 included three neurosurgeons, an anesthesiologist, three neuromonitoring

teams, representatives from Medtronic (the implant donor), operating room technicians, nurses and administrators.

Dr. Moulton says a combination of Communism, corruption, poverty and a widespread lack of medical insurance leaves many of Vietnam’s worst spinal cases to rely on charity—and Vietnamese doctors to rely on prepayment of services.

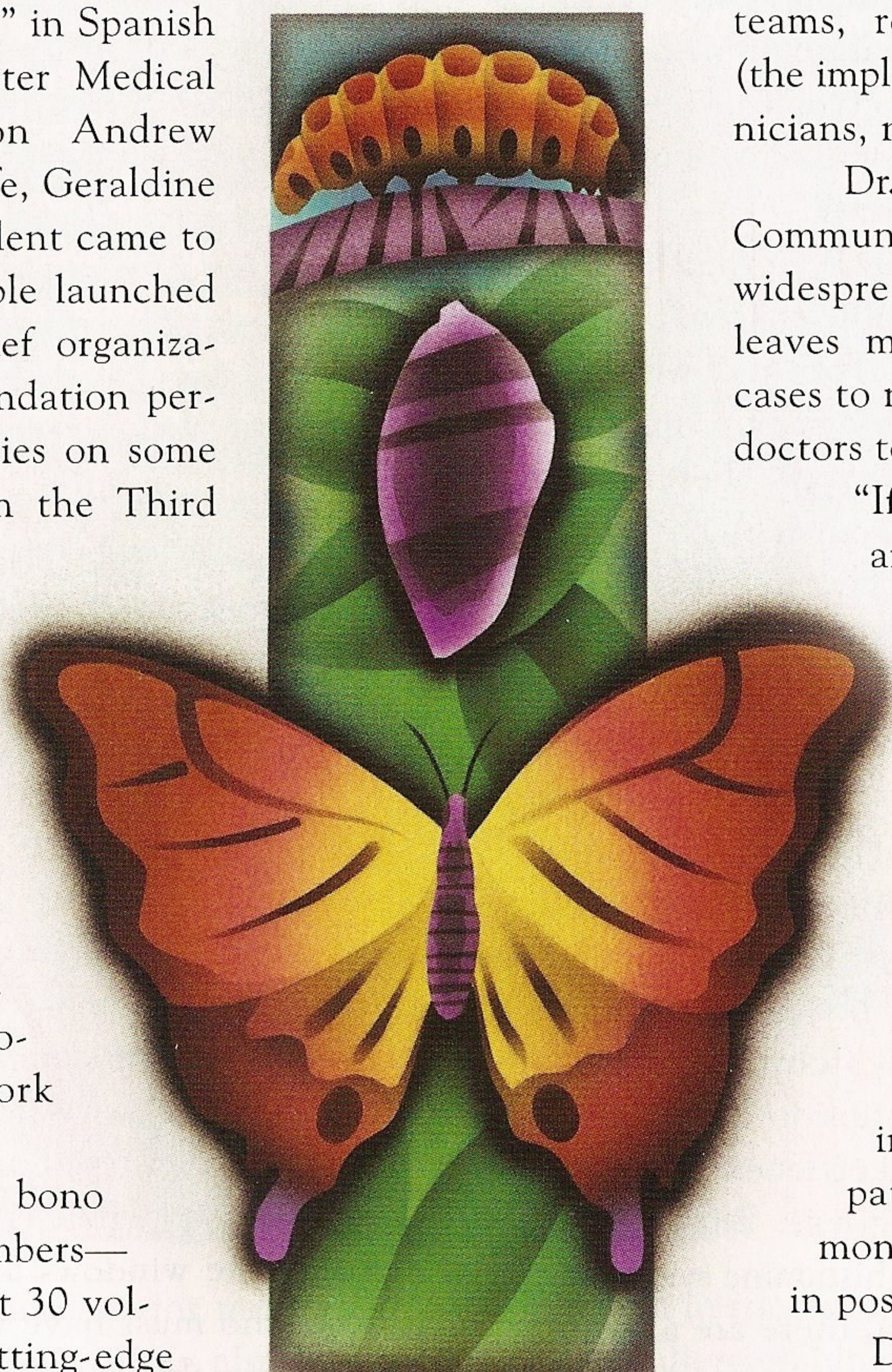
“If you were injured in an accident and needed some screws to stabilize your spine, the doctor would come to you and your family and say you have to go down to this shop and buy X, Y and Z, and come back with it,” says Dr. Moulton. “But the screws cost \$250 each, and you need eight of them. If you’re earning a few dollars a day, that is an insurmountable number. So the patients end up staying in a cast for months and just hoping things stay in position.”

During the trip, Dr. Moulton and his team operated on 25 patients, including some whose extremely complex operations took up to 12 hours. Patients included scoliosis and tuberculosis sufferers as well as victims of moped accidents. “Vietnam is a sea of mopeds, weaving in and out, and people don’t wear helmets,” says the doctor.

Dr. Moulton’s most memorable case was a Buddhist monk with a collapsed spine due to tuberculosis, a common ailment in Vietnam. “She had no other hope,” he says. “The Vietnamese surgeons knew what to do, but were powerless to find the money.”

The operation was a success. “When I go on these trips,” says Dr. Moulton, “I feel I’m doing what I was meant to do when I decided to become a doctor.”

The Butterfly Foundation’s next destination is Lima, Peru, in April. Later this year, the group will be traveling to the largest children’s hospital in Mexico to update surgeons on the newest techniques. ■



Andrew Moulton, M.D.