

THE HEALTHY DOCTOR PODCAST

Episode 28 – Rick Allen

Caring for Medical Missionaries

Steve Sartori:

Welcome to The Healthy Doctor Podcast, where we host conversations about physician well-being. I'm Dr. Steve Sartori, Director of the Center for Well-being at the Christian Medical & Dental Associations.

Steve Sartori:

Medical missionaries provide healthcare services in some of the most underserved areas of the world. The challenges of being a cross-cultural healthcare worker pose a significant risk for burnout. And MedSend, a faith-based non-profit organization, is taking steps to promote the well-being of this at-risk group. My guest on this episode is Rick Allen, the CEO of MedSend.

Steve Sartori:

Rick started his professional career in the emerging software business, and ultimately became CEO before transitioning into ministry. He became a member of the pastoral staff at Black Rock Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, and he and his wife went on to lead a remote campus of Black Rock in Stanford, Connecticut. During his eight years there, he also accepted a leadership role at MedSend, a faith-based non-profit organization that supports medical missions. He ultimately resigned his pastorate and became the full-time CEO of MedSend. Rick has degrees in financing and marketing from Temple University. He and his wife, Linda, recently celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. They have four adult daughters and two grandchildren. Tune in, and let's see what Rick has to share with us.

Steve Sartori:

Welcome, Rick. Thanks for coming to The Healthy Doctor Podcast. It's good to have you here.

Rick Allen:

Thank you Steve. Appreciate being here.

Steve Sartori:

I've known you for quite a while, Rick and I appreciate who you are and what you do, but our listeners don't know you as well. So, if we could start out by you just sharing a bit, what is MedSend?

Rick Allen:

MedSend's primary mission is to be a catalyst for global healthcare missions. And we do that in three primary services. The first one is when a healthcare professional, pretty broadly defined, starting with doctors, nurses, dentists and into allied health, including mental health, when they finish up their education, if they're willing to serve as a long-term healthcare missionary in the United States and abroad (We have about 10% of our people in Christ-centered clinics here in the US), we will come alongside of them and take their educational debt, monthly payments, removing financial debt related to their healthcare education as an obstacle to their long-term service. The second is we come alongside of individuals, we call it the MedSend National Scholars program, and this is individuals in Africa and Asia who are being trained primarily in mission hospitals in advanced healthcare training. Specifically, this is for physicians and it's creating specialization for them.

Rick Allen:

Generally, these programs are anywhere from three to five years. They are equivalent to what we have here, and would be referred to as a residency program, where they're learning a specialization. And then the third component of MedSend really has to do with the care of missionaries, particularly those going from here to the world. As you know, Steve, the world is becoming much more difficult and dangerous, and what we're seeing is a very high level of stress in many of our young healthcare professionals. So, we are attempting to come alongside of them with something called the MedSend Longevity Project. And those are the three components of MedSend.

Steve Sartori:

Thank you for sharing that, Rick. It sounds like quite an exciting organization to lead. So, how do you happen to be the person that leads MedSend? How did you get there?

Rick Allen:

It's an interesting journey. I am a first career business person. I came out of college with a business degree and a dual degree in finance and marketing, and went right into the computer software business. I started off as a young salesman, and spent 25 years in the computer software business. It was a wonderful time. There's not many opportunities in any given generation to become part of an industry that transforms the world. And I was part of that in the software business. It was really a blessing to be a part of, and see it grow from infancy to a global phenomenon that we use each and every day, including on this call. So, that was my first career. I went through what I will call a process of surrender, and I was looking to deepen my faith, and at one point just on my knees, went to the Lord and said, "Transform my heart and my trajectory to be the man that you had designed me to be."

Rick Allen:

And through that process, about eight years after this surrender inflection, if you will, I found myself as a pastor and running a global mission organization, MedSend. So, it's been quite the journey. I was able to continue to do both. I was bi-vocational. I was pastoring a small church in Stamford, Connecticut and it was growing, and I was running MedSend, and it was growing. And five years ago, I had to make a decision to give one of them up, because frankly I wasn't doing either one with excellence because they were both growing and I just couldn't keep up. So, after much prayer and consultation I decided to give up the pastorate and have been now full-time at MedSend for the last five years.

Steve Sartori:

MedSend, you've shared with us a bit about what MedSend does, but what is it that these healthcare missionaries, these global health workers do? What is it that really excites you about their work?

Rick Allen:

I classify it as the delivery of compassionate care in Christ's name. The models of healthcare are very different globally than what we know in the West. And oftentimes, it is an enormously scarce resource, particularly in many locations where mission hospitals are. So, they can be oftentimes, the communities that they serve are oftentimes referred to as catchment areas. And a mission hospital, or even a clinic can oftentimes be a catchment area for a half a million to a million people. That means it's their only source of healthcare. So, delivering healthcare with compassion and offering dignity to the individual in desperate situations is what often occurs with healthcare missionaries.

Steve Sartori:

It's a difficult job for these folks. They're serving large catchment areas, difficult needs, limited resources. And you mentioned that one of the arms of MedSend is to care for these people, to take care of them, because they're under great duress oftentimes. So, could you flesh that out a little bit more about what that means for MedSend as you care for these people?

Rick Allen:

Yes. Thank you. The MedSend Longevity Project is the initiative that is designed to care specifically for our grant recipients, but ultimately our goal is to improve the entire infrastructure of global healthcare missions, and the way that healthcare missionaries are selected and assigned to a location, the way that they are prepared before they go, and then how they are cared for once they're on the field. So, we are attempting to model those three areas. The Longevity program is now about 18 months old, so we are just now getting underway with these initiatives, but we're trying to start initiatives in each one of these areas.

Rick Allen:

So, the first one really is a mentoring project that is underway. We have asked what we call the MedSend alumni, which are those individuals that have served as healthcare professionals, missionaries, and have come back to the States and resumed a career back here, we've asked them to become coach mentors for new missionaries going out onto the field. And we have the CMDA Center for Wellness teaching these individuals the coaching and mentoring skills, and then staying with them and updating their skills. And what we ask them to do is to take on two new healthcare missionaries that are going to the field. And when you now receive a MedSend grant, you are assigned a coach mentor for a period of two years. And as a part of the acceptance of your grant, you're expected to contact this individual once a month, 24 times.

Rick Allen:

And in an ideal world, we are looking at 12 months here, preparing, raising your support, the deputization process and the leaving, and then a year on the field, your first year when there's so many transitions that are occurring. So, that's an ideal world. We recognize that it'll be different for each individual, and it might be almost two years strictly on the field, but that's okay. We want them to have a listening ear of someone who knows the experience, and someone who has been well-trained and prepared, and as I mentioned supported. So that's the first element.

Rick Allen:

The second element is MedSend requires an annual report from our grant recipients that are on the field. It's a relatively short report, just asking individuals how they're doing. We have hired an organization, Godspeed Resources or GRC, and we are adding a stress indicator survey now with each of the annual reports, and the results are going right to GRC. This is confidential. It's between GRC and the individual. We want them to be open and honest. We do not get the specific reports on the conversations that they have, or even who they're speaking with. We want the individual missionary, who might be experiencing some stress, and quite frankly, trauma. There's lots of trauma that occurs in this role, to have full confidence that their grant would not be jeopardized based upon what they're experiencing. And by the way, what we're doing specifically is we have empowered GRC to give the individual a call, a video-based call, wherever they're located in the world, and to start, should they both decide it's a good idea to move forward, they start a counseling session via video.

Rick Allen:

The third component is we're doing what's called a med retreat, and we've hired an organization called Alongside to create the content and curriculum for one week long retreats, global retreats, we're doing two globally, and then one here in the US. This will be focused primarily in three areas for the healthcare professional and specific to the kinds of situations and circumstances that they find themselves in. And it's going to be in the area of professional, relational and spiritual. Those elements of their life are the kinds of things that we're going to address on these med retreats. And they will be essentially staffed by pastors, mental health professionals, individuals from GRC, which will allow them to meet face-to-face and continue the relationship with the people that they're talking to on Zoom. You'll be required as a part of your grant to attend one of these every other year. So, as I mentioned, there'll be two international and then one in the US. We are looking for the one in the US to bring our folks from South Central America and the Caribbean Basin up to this opportunity here that we're going to hold in Florida.

Steve Sartori:

That's really quite amazing. So, stepping back from that, the reason for caring for all of these people is that they're having trouble. Many of them are having trouble. What are the kinds of circumstances or problems that you had been observing that prompted you to develop this comprehensive approach?

Rick Allen:

Steve, this is very difficult. These individuals are expected to perform in a very high level in areas of incredible need. It's incomprehensible for us in the West in general to understand the level of need and in very low resource areas. I oftentimes share with people that I'm talking to what a new healthcare professional goes through. And I often have a chance to meet with these individuals, and I'll ask them two questions, "What do you feel you're well-prepared for as you're heading out?" And most of the time they'll say, "Well, my healthcare training," which they absolutely are correct. If they have been trained in a US-based school whatever their specialty is, they are the best healthcare trained individual in all of human history. What God has revealed to us about the human body and the level of technology that we have available to us makes them the best trained healthcare professional ever.

Rick Allen:

So, they should feel competent. I'll often ask them then next, "What do you feel least prepared for?" And oftentimes, they will say, "Well, can I live up to the title of missionary?" They hold them in high regard. And they're just not certain oftentimes that they have the strength of faith. And frankly, I think that's a good thing. I think we all should wrestle with that, because it is challenging and brings us to the cross. So, then they get on the field, and the first thing they recognize that 50% of what they have learned is of no value to them. They don't have the high-tech equipment. They don't have anything like what they experienced in med school or residency or nursing. Their education, which they're most confident in reduces in its level of importance, because now they're facing things that they've never seen before. They may have read about them in books, but they have never encountered them. And there are new challenges every day which drive them back to the basics of textbooks.

Rick Allen:

The next thing is the level of death that they face. And that brings deterioration not only in their confidence of themselves, but also in their relationship with God. Did I make the right choice, God? Did I hear you correctly? All of these people are dying in my arms. Am I not worthy? Did I misunderstand your calling? So, there is a spiritual component to this. And then finally, there's a relational component. If you're single, you're lonely. You're experiencing intense loneliness. If you're married, particularly with children, oftentimes the spouse and it could be a man or a woman, 50% of the people we support are

women, and many of them have families. Their families oftentimes struggle, particularly during that first year, but oftentimes for years. They call and they say, "I need you to come home from the hospital."

Rick Allen:

Well, they just can't. The demands are so high. The expectation that they place on themselves oftentimes is extremely high. They're there to represent God. The demand never stops. The line never gets smaller. So, if they go home, their impression is someone dies. If they take vacation, more people die. So, they put these enormous pressures on themselves. So, what you see is this deterioration of their training, of their relationship with God and their own confidence, and the deterioration on a personal level. So, this is an extreme case, but I can tell you, Steve, that I see this time and time again. And this is why we have made a commitment to try and help sustain them through this Longevity Project, because the demands are extreme.

Steve Sartori:

As I listen to you, I can't help but think, if we pay attention to the folks like you are, why can't we do that in the States? Why can't healthcare organizations, or why don't we use a comprehensive approach of preventive, mentoring and peer support, coupled with access readily to confidential mental health services, and then also have well-being events and times for us to connect and relax and enjoy and learn together? It seems to me, you really could move into healthcare anywhere in this country and make a difference.

Rick Allen:

I would agree with that. As I started to make observations about what was going on in the mission field, I started to look for answers back here in the States, and went to a couple of very large organizations and asked them where they're facing issues and how were they dealing with them and it became readily apparent that this is a stressful profession, and individuals need care. And oftentimes, they're reluctant to accept it. So, the answers are very complex and multilayered, but there is no doubt that the stresses and the level of intimacy that the delivery of healthcare requires, it certainly impacts the heart, the head and the soul.

Steve Sartori:

Rick, I get excited of course, listening to you every time I speak with you, and I know our listeners will too. So, how do they find out more about MedSend? And this is an exciting organization to partner with. How do they find out more?

Rick Allen:

Thank you. The primary way is through our website or our Facebook location. We're very simple, www.medsend.org, or you can just go, MedSend on Facebook. We are continually providing updates and content. And Steve, I'll tell you that, of course I'm a bit biased, but our content is so exciting to see how God is moving through this world, through healthcare professionals is in times miraculous. The stories that we hear, the things that we're able to publish and to share are just incredible. So, I want to recommend if you have any interest at all in global healthcare missions that you register with us, either like us on Facebook, or sign up for our emails at www.medsend.org.

Rick Allen:

You will be amazed, I'm certain, regardless of how much you know. One of the benefits of MedSend is that we're really, if you will, an enabling organization. We have 50 mission-sending organizations as our partners. So, we get to see activity from missionaries across 50 sending organizations. And what that

does is it gives you this incredibly broad global perspective of what is going on at any given time about 75 countries. We've supported individuals in 90 countries over the time that we've been an organization, but at a time like this, we've got people in 75 countries that we're helping to support.

Steve Sartori:

What a unique role and calling you all have in this domain of global health. And thanks for leading the charge. As we bring it to a close, Rick, anything else you would like to share with our listeners before we close?

Rick Allen:

Well, I am a man of prayer, and we certainly could use your prayer, not just as MedSend, but as global healthcare missions. And if any of your listeners are considering either full-time service as a healthcare missionary, or part-time, particularly individuals who are considering retiring or looking at a second career, there is enormous opportunity. You are desperately needed, regardless of how much time you can spare, the longer, the better of course. But if you're willing to go, even for a period such as a month, what you're able to do is become relief so that the individuals on the field are able to recoup and regenerate. You give them some amount of relief. So, I just want to request prayer for MedSend and the decisions that we're making both large and small, but also just to encourage those that might the Holy Spirit may be tapping at their heart to get involved, and to understand your place in the way that God, through the Holy Spirit, is using healthcare missions around the world, even here in the US in Christ-centered clinics.

Steve Sartori:

Well, I hope and pray that this is one other way the word gets out, and people are called to pray and people are called to consider doing what you did years ago, surrender and ask God to show them what the next step will be. It may not be changing from a software executive to a pastor, to a MedSend CEO, but we don't know what God will do when we surrender.

Rick Allen:

That's right.

Steve Sartori:

Well, thanks for being with me today, Rick and I look forward to further conversations. Keep doing what you're doing, and may God bless you.

Rick Allen:

God bless you and your listeners.

Steve Sartori:

What an exciting conversation to hear Rick talk about rolling out a comprehensive program of caring for global healthcare workers. I truly believe that what he has started and initiated through MedSend could be a template or a prototype for us back here in the States of how to care for one another. Using preventive measures such as mentoring with a coach approach, having comprehensive readily available mental health professional services, and also using retreats and events and opportunities to learn about burnout and more importantly, how to protect and promote the wellbeing of healthcare professionals. Thanks to Rick for what he's doing. If you would like to connect with MedSend, or hear more about what they're doing, as Rick shared, please visit their website at www.medsend.org. At CMDA, we also have a

Center for Advancing Healthcare Missions. So, you could look that up on the web as well, and get connected to some resources through CMDA.

Steve Sartori:

At the CMDA Center for Well-being, we help doctors and other healthcare professionals align with God, optimize well-being and maximize influence. We offer professional coaching services to help you advance well-being, navigate transitions, or grow your leadership skills. For more information visit www.cmda.org/coaching or email coaching@cmda.org. Our coach training courses afford the opportunity to learn the mindset and skills of coaching, and that can equip you to help others without giving them advice. These very popular courses are dually accredited, providing category one CME credits, and also coach training hours approved by the International Coaching Federation. To stay abreast of current course offerings, visit www.cmda.org/events. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Healthy Doctor, and we appreciate you tuning in. Please tune in again next month. And until then, please remember to care for yourself as you care for others.

Announcer:

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