

# A Partnership 18 Years in the Making: Dr. Roger Härtl and the Tanzania Neurosurgery Project

When Dr. Roger Härtl first traveled to Tanzania nearly two decades ago, he encountered a healthcare system stretched far beyond its limits — children with untreated hydrocephalus, young patients losing years of life to spinal deformity and trauma victims waiting for surgery that never came. What he witnessed set the course of his career and the foundation for one of the most enduring global neurosurgery partnerships in the world.

Since 2008, the Tanzania Neurosurgery Project at Weill Cornell Medicine has transformed neurosurgical care in East Africa. The region has gone from 3 neurosurgeries per year for 40 million people to 25. More than 40 scientific manuscripts have been published through the collaboration. Surgeons and nurses at Bugando Medical Center and the Muhimbili Orthopaedic Institute have been trained, mentored and, increasingly, leading on their own.



## Built to Last

The Tanzania Neurosurgery Project was designed from the start to avoid the limitations of short-term medical volunteerism. Rather than rotating visiting teams, the program sustains a full-time neurosurgeon living and working in Tanzania for a year at a time. Tanzanian surgeons also visit New York for training with Weill Cornell Medicine specialists. Weekly Zoom meetings keep the collaboration active year-round. And each year, the team convenes for the 360° Spine Course — a high-level program for both operative and non-operative participants, with faculty this year including a colleague from HSS who taught injection techniques.

This past spring, Dr. Härtl traveled to Dar es Salaam for the inauguration of the International Society of Global Neurosurgery (ISGNS). Among the newly elected leadership: Dr. Beverly Cheserem, a former fellow of the Tanzania Neurosurgery Project and now one of East Africa's leading neurosurgeons.

"Watching her take her place in the leadership of this new society is one of the proudest moments of my career," Dr. Härtl said. "This is exactly what sustainable global neurosurgery looks like."

## Research as the Road to Independence

Central to the program's philosophy is the belief that research — not just clinical training — is what allows surgeons across the world to become truly independent.

"Surgeons in Tanzania learn how to conduct research at a high level, write and publish papers, present at international meetings," Dr. Härtl said. "That's the purpose of doing research together: to give them self-esteem and foster their independence. They can eventually establish their own research groups and grow."

The collaboration doesn't just transfer skills — it builds standing. Tanzanian surgeons contribute to the academic record, shape research questions and present findings alongside their Weill Cornell colleagues on international stages.



## What the U.S. Can Learn From Tanzania

Perhaps the most striking insight Dr. Härtl offers is that the learning runs both ways. "It's a rapidly evolving society, economically and demographically," he said. "There's going to be a huge need for healthcare — and they will jump to new technologies faster than us." Spinal endoscopy, for example, is advancing more quickly in Tanzania than in the United States. "It took us decades to do spinal navigation," Dr. Härtl said. "They are not going to be far behind."

Since its founding in 2008, the Tanzania Neurosurgery Project has grown into far more than a bilateral collaboration. It is a model — one that has produced surgeons now leading on the world stage, dozens of peer-reviewed publications and proof that sustainable global surgery is possible when built on partnership, patience and mutual respect.



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