

## BREAKING NEWS



## Federal judge blocks Indiana abortion law

# Bloomington health care workers visit Niger, one of the world's poorest countries

By Dann Denny  
August 16, 2010

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Physician Dwain Illman talks with a mother and her child through a translator from the capital city of Niamey. Courtesy photo

With the mother close by, registered nurse Chris Sherwood gives infant formula to a sick, undernourished child in a desert village in Niger. Sherwood, with help from Southern Indiana Pediatrics, took with her to the African village a large suitcase filled with infant formula, bottles and syringes. Courtesy photo

Dr. Dwain Illman, medical director for Volunteers in Medicine, has made more than 20 medical mission trips to India, Haiti, Ecuador and Africa.

But last month, when the retired Bloomington Hospital emergency room physician spent nearly two weeks in a tiny desert village in West Africa, he came face-to-face with a level of poverty he'd never before seen.

"The people that came to our clinic were the thinnest I'd ever seen," Illman said. "They were fairly tall, but the men averaged 125 pounds and the women 110 pounds."

Illman said the people were not only thinly built, but thin on hope — having a look of despair in their eyes.

"On most medical mission trips, the people receiving help are smiling and happy, but these villagers were listless," he said. "They had to devote all their energy to getting water and finding their next meal in order to stay alive."

What stabbed Illman's heart the deepest were the children.

"The kids were not laughing or playing," he said.

"They had that glazed look in their eyes from undernourishment. They were all very underweight, and most had worms in their bellies."

## One of the poorest countries

In Africa, Illman was part of a medical team working for a Christian mission group called Master Provisions. He was joined on the team by Chris Sherwood, a registered nurse at Southern Indiana Pediatrics; two nurses from Cincinnati; and a paramedic from Kentucky.

Their plane landed in Niamey, the capital of the West African nation of Niger.

"It was the poorest capital city I have ever seen," he said.

"There were hardly any buildings; just a few merchants selling stuff on the street. Most rankings put Niger among the five poorest countries in the world."

The team drove for three hours over dirt roads to Laba, a village of 140 people on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The villagers waged a daily battle for sustenance.

"They grew sorghum, their only food source," he said. "They would grind it up, add water and cook it. It looked like oatmeal."

## Dust storms

When Illman and the other team members arrived in the Laba village, they set up tents to sleep in.

"They were worthless," Illman said. "We had a dust storm every other day that would blow our tents down. So we slept on air mattresses under the stars."

Illman said about 200 dust storms sweep through the village each year with 100-mph winds, some so thick they turn the sky black. During one severe storm, he huddled in the corner of the clinic and waited it out.

Later, he saw Sherwood, who looked particularly spent.

"She had been in a primitive outdoor privy with low walls and no roof when the storm hit," he said. "She had to hunker down on the toilet for 30 minutes until it passed."

## Treating the sick

The team members set up a makeshift clinic, where they treated more than 1,500 patients over a 12-day span. Some people in neighboring villages walked 40 miles to the clinic.

"We treated a lot of deep skin infections with antibiotics and injections," Illman said. "Half of their problems could have been prevented with soap and water, but in the desert water is precious and hard to get."

Illman said other than a few shallow ponds the villagers used to water "the skinniest cow and goats I've ever seen," there was just one source of water — a government-funded, hand-dug well four miles from the village.

"I'd never worked at a clinic where everyone was so undernourished and chronically ill," Illman said. "It was a struggle for all of us on the team to see this day after day."

Illman will never forget an 18-year-old mother who came to the clinic suffering from malaria. She had a two-month-old baby who weighed only five pounds and had a high fever.

The young mother was accompanied by her 60-year-old husband and her husband's other wife, who'd brought a two-year-old sick child with a fever.

“Polygamy is common in the Muslim world,” he said. “Men are allowed to have up to four wives. It was sad to see this entire family suffering so much.”

But Illman hopes to make a sizeable dent in that suffering. Next week he will meet with representatives from the Fellowship of Associates of Medical Evangelists, a Christian mission, to talk about building a permanent medical clinic in the village staffed year-round with a paramedic.

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