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Haiti Hospital's Fight Against TB Falls to One Man

By [IAN URBINA](#)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — At a fly-infested clinic hastily erected alongside the rubble of the only tuberculosis sanatorium in this country, Pierre-Louis Monfort is a lonely man in a crowded room.

Haiti has the highest tuberculosis rate in the Americas, and health experts say it is about to drastically increase.

But amid the ramshackle remains of the hospital where the country's most infected patients used to live, Mr. Monfort runs the clinic alone, facing a vastness of unmet need that is as clear as the desperation on the faces around the room.

"I'm drowning," said Mr. Monfort, 52, flanked by a line of people waiting for pills as he emptied a bedpan full of blood. All of the hospital's 50 other nurses and 20 doctors died in the earthquake or have refused to return to work out of fear for the building's safety or preoccupation with their own problems, he said. Mr. Monfort joked that the earthquake had earned him a promotion from a staff nurse at the sanatorium to its new executive director.

In normal times, Haiti sees about 30,000 new cases of tuberculosis each year. Among infectious diseases, it is the country's second most common killer, after AIDS, according to the World Health Organization.

The situation has gone from bad to worse because the earthquake set off a dangerous diaspora. Most of the sanatorium's several hundred surviving patients fled and are now living in the densely packed tent cities

where experts say they are probably spreading the disease. Most of these patients have also stopped taking their daily regimen of pills, thereby heightening the chance that there will be an outbreak of a strain resistant to treatment, experts say.

Mr. Monfort scavenges the rubble daily for medicines and needles. He sterilizes needles using bleach and then reuses the bleach to clean the floors. In his cramped clinic, eight of the sickest and most contagious patients lay on brown- and red-stained beds. He said he had lost count of how many more were sleeping in other pockets alongside the hospital. Hundreds come daily to pick up medicine.

Outside the clinic, the air is thick with the sickening smell of rotting bodies. Occasionally a breeze carried a waft of char from small cooking fires nearby, offering a respite from the stench and the flies.

Mr. Monfort began to explain that his biggest problem was a lack of food. Suddenly a huge crash shook the clinic. A patient screamed. Everyone stood still, eyes darting. A man outside yelled that another section of the hospital had collapsed. People looking for materials to build huts had pulled wood pilings from a section of the hospital roof, which then fell as the scavengers leapt to safety, the man said.

Mr. Monfort looked to the ground silently as if the weight of his lonely responsibility had just come crashing down.

"These people are dying and in pain here," he said. "And no one seems to care."

At the Champ de Mars, Jean-Baptiste Renauld sat on a curb, one shoe missing, his blue polo shirt torn, his head cupped in his hands. "I have TB, and I am also supposed to get dialysis every other day," he said, explaining that he was a doctor's assistant before

the earthquake and meticulous about his treatments. "I have not had dialysis in three weeks, and I feel my blood is rotting from inside."

Back at the clinic, Mr. Monfort struggled to fix an IV that had missed the vein and was painfully pumping fluids under a patient's skin. Another ghost of a man hobbled to the doorway on crutches, moaning for help. "Please wait, please wait," Mr. Monfort said in a tense whisper.

The biggest source of stress, Mr. Monfort said, is that his three children and wife are living on the street because the earthquake destroyed their home. His wife begs him daily to stay with them. Instead, unpaid and without a mask or gloves to wear, he walks to the sanatorium each day at 6 a.m. and stays until 8 p.m. when most of the patients drift to sleep.

"Why don't you just leave us to die?" asked Clervil Orange, 39. Mr. Monfort looked offended by the notion. But he did not answer and the question seemed to stick with him.

The ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus once wrote that there was a type of suffering so intense that, even in our sleep, it bores into the heart until eventually, "in our own despair, against our will," it taps into a terrible wisdom.

After several minutes in silence, Mr. Monfort spoke of that wisdom. He referred to it as a "strange hope" that had sprung from the suffering of his patients and the loss and abandonment of his fellow staff members.

"These people here are dying, but they keep me alive," he said. "I know they are hurting more than me and not complaining.

"So," he said, handing another walk-in patient a packet of pills, "I must continue."