

A Giving Heart, a Skillful Hand

DR. ROBERT JENSEN PUTS HIS PLASTIC SURGERY SKILLS TO GENEROUS USE

words by Heidi Chackel

IN THIS DAY AND AGE, images associated with hunger, illness, physical deformation and disaster flood the media and our minds. Many people hope to have the opportunity to respond to suffering by helping those less fortunate than themselves. Dr. Robert Jensen, of Jensen Center for Cosmetic and Plastic Surgery in Medford, created that opportunity for himself and his fellow colleagues. He along with several other physicians and nurses spend almost two weeks of every year providing medical services to the residents of Palau, the fourth smallest country in the world.

Palau is an island nation in the Pacific Ocean, about 500 miles east of the Philippines. Dr. Jensen's desire to help the people of Palau emerged after he went to visit a friend on the island for a scuba diving vacation in the 1990s.

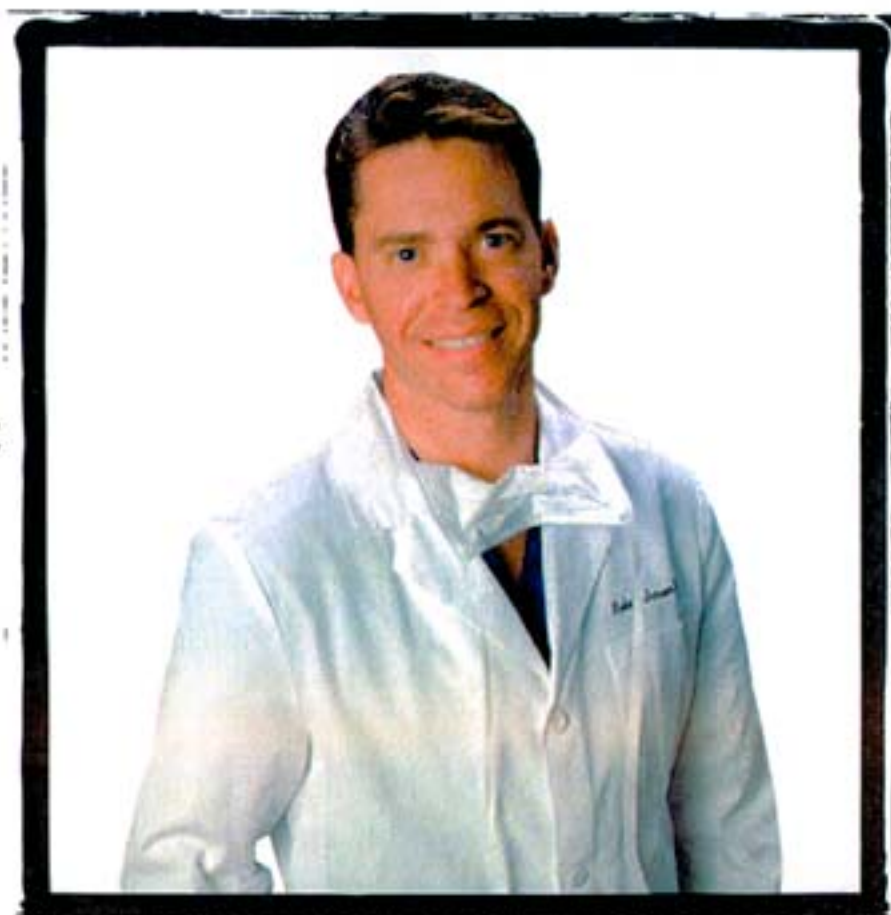
For over a decade now, Dr. Jensen has traveled back to Palau to help 25 to 30 locals per year. His friend's wife is also a surgeon; she works with Dr. Jensen and his team to coordinate trips, patients and provide follow up care. Physicians from Oregon often join him, including anesthesiologists Dr. Magdalena Ciurlik and Dr. Daniel Kahn and his wife. Many nurses also go along, including Amy Davis, Lee Davis and Courtney Lee. All members of the team take time off from work to help the Palauan, often paying their own way.

"We are usually provided with a place to stay," says Dr. Jensen. "The people are very hospitable as they are extremely grateful and really depend on us. They do not have the funds to travel for medical attention. The President of the country actually met with me once to show his appreciation."

As a plastic surgeon, Dr. Jensen has the opportunity to provide his patients with many services to improve the quality of their lives. In Palau, he works on a variety of cases, with the most common being cleft lip, burns, deformities and congenital problems.

"Palau is such a small country that they really look to others for help. The gratitude that they show makes all of our efforts worthwhile. Even helping one person who couldn't get that kind of care otherwise is enough. Deformities can ostracize people within their community. Repairing a cleft palate can change a child's speech forever. It makes you feel great to help."

The team brings most of their own supplies so as not to exhaust the little that is available in Palau. Some Southern Oregon medical providers, including Providence and Rogue Valley



Medical Centers, donate supplies and instruments for the effort. The medical providers in Palau have also given Dr. Jensen a wish list of supplies and equipment that they really need, and he has been working to find charitable organizations to help out with donations.

"I am kind of hooked into the system now, and I plan to keep doing this for a long time. I have four daughters and one has gone with me a few times. Some of the younger ones want to come eventually, as well," says Jensen.

Dr. Jensen has been practicing in Medford since 1991. The success of his Palau trips inspired him to launch a similar program locally. "Many people here in Southern Oregon have no insurance or are underinsured, and there are kids and adults who are suffering and find it impossible to get surgery for everything from burn scars to deformities to problems brought on by violent crimes. There is a whole myriad of things plastic surgeons can do to help these people."

Because Dr. Jensen has his own surgery center, he does not need to rely on the hospital or outside care to take on extra patients. "Physicians in the area can refer patients to our office who would benefit from, but do not have the funds or insurance coverage for, cancer reconstruction and a wide variety of procedures," he says.

Dr. Jensen hopes to help 12 patients per year on a local basis as well as continue his trips to Palau. He's simply happy to help how he can. ^A

Have you wondered about the lives of those who live and work near you? Who knows, maybe your waitress is a foster parent who helps children in great times of need. Or perhaps your lawyer offers his/her services free of charge to battered women. We would love to share the stories of Southern Oregon's heroes with readers. If you know an interesting individual who would fit under the title "Local Heroes", please let us know at heidi@combinedcommunications.com or 541-585-3561.