

CHS News

First Open Heart Surgery in Belize Becomes Reality

CHARLOTTE, N.C.—On July 16 and 17, physicians from the [Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital](#) (KMH), in Belize City, Belize, and from [Carolinas HealthCare System](#) (CHS) performed the first open heart surgeries in the country of Belize.

Adrian Coye, MD, Medical Services Director at KMH and R. Mark Stiegel, MD, FACS, cardiothoracic surgeon with CHS's [Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute](#) (SHVI) performed a coronary artery bypass graft on 73-year-old Belizean man and a mitral valve replacement on a 56-year-old Belizean woman. The patients performed well both during surgery and post-surgery.

"This is a very special moment that has allowed everyone involved to make history in Belize," said Dr. Coye. "Belizean patients should receive the same level of care as others worldwide, and we are thrilled to have reached this point in what we can offer for medical services in our country."

Although heart disease is a leading cause of death in Belize, the country lacked a modern cardiovascular diagnostic and interventional facility up until 2011, when CHS's [International Medical Outreach \(IMO\) Program](#) began providing support. Before that time, patients would either not receive treatment or would travel to neighboring countries for cardiac services. Today, due to ongoing support from the IMO Program, KMH has the equipment and medical expertise necessary to diagnose and treat patients with heart ailments in the country.

"This is an exciting time for the people of Belize, and we hope this achievement paves the way for future improvements in the country's healthcare services," said Francis Robicsek, MD, PhD, vice president of the IMO Program, a partnership between CHS and the [Heineman Foundation of Charlotte](#) (Heineman). "In collaboration with SHVI, we will continue our support to KMH and emerging cardiology program to provide sustainable cardiac care in Belize."

The IMO Program donated and installed the country's first fully-equipped cardiac catheterization laboratory in February 2011 at KMH, one of only two major hospitals in Belize. The laboratory, also equipped with diagnostic imaging equipment, modernized cardiac care by 30 years.

Since October 2011, the IMO Program has sent cardiology teams from SHVI to perform catheterizations in Belize each month and will continue to send teams until the interventional cardiologist at KMH is trained to perform catheterizations alone. The procedures performed in the laboratory have helped identify several patients in need of open heart surgery.

"We are proud and privileged to support our colleagues in Belize and to help them offer advanced cardiovascular services for the benefit of their citizens," said Michael Tarwater, Chief Executive Officer of CHS. "Our involvement in this momentous accomplishment is an outcome of CHS's commitment to healthcare innovation and its quality cardiology programs through SHVI. We look forward to continuing our collaboration globally."

The open heart surgery program at SHVI was ranked in the top 15 percent in the United States for coronary artery bypass graft and received a three out of three star rating by The Society for Thoracic Surgeons from July 2010 to June 2011.

The IMO Program also helped make possible the first heart transplant surgery in Costa Rica in 2007, and it co-founded the largest, most comprehensive heart institute in Central America, located in Guatemala City, in 1984. The institute was established nearly a decade after the Program assisted with the first five open heart surgeries in Guatemala

Since the 1960s, the IMO Program has donated a variety of medical equipment to hospitals and clinics worldwide, and it

has facilitated free educational opportunities for medical personnel from facilities globally. Dr. Coye and other medical staff at KHMH have benefited from educational experiences at CHS's largest hospital, Carolinas Medical Center, in Charlotte.

"This is a milestone in the history of KHMH and of medicine in Belize," said Gary Longworth, MD, Chief Executive Officer of KHMH. "The procedures prove what can be done when you have a committed and determined team, as well as wonderful cooperation from organizations like CHS and Heineman."

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[Carolinas HealthCare System](http://www.carolinashealthcare.org) (www.carolinashealthcare.org), one of the nation's leading and most innovative healthcare organizations, provides a full spectrum of healthcare and wellness programs throughout North and South Carolina. Its diverse network of more than 650 care locations includes academic medical centers, hospitals, healthcare pavilions, physician practices, destination centers, surgical and rehabilitation centers, home health agencies, nursing homes and hospice and palliative care. Carolinas HealthCare System works to improve and enhance the overall health and wellbeing of its communities through high quality patient care, education and research programs, and numerous collaborative partnerships and initiatives.

[Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital](http://www.khnh.bz) (www.khnh.bz), located in Belize City, Belize, is the country's flagship hospital, providing tertiary care for the nation and serving as the secondary care hospital for the Central Health Region. Founded in 1820, the hospital originally was called the Old Belize City Hospital and was renamed in 1995 in honor of Dr. Karl Heusner, a Belize native known throughout Latin America and the Caribbean for his expertise in tropical diseases. Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital was formally incorporated as a statutory authority by way of the KHMH Act of 2000, which elected it as the country's national referral hospital.