

Interview

An interview with Team Broken Earth CEO, Dr. Art Rideout

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Art Rideout is a plastic reconstructive surgeon working in St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. He is the CEO and co-founder of Team Broken Earth, a registered charity driven by doctors, nurses, and other specialized healthcare professionals. When the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, Dr. Rideout, and several of his esteemed colleagues saw an opportunity to put a small team together to help. While they originally believed their work would be a single mission, Team Broken Earth has since expanded its chapters nationwide and is currently doing relief work in Guatemala, Haiti, Nepal, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and Ethiopia. In this interview Dr. Rideout shared his background, Team Broken Earth's accomplishments, and goals for the future.

Where did you grow up, and where did you complete your training?

I was born in New Brunswick and spent a lot of years there, then lived a few years in Ontario. I went to school in Nova Scotia and did medical school here at Memorial University. Other things that shaped my career was becoming a family doctor for a year, doing some general surgery, and being lucky enough to train in many different places, including Plastics at McGill, a fellowship in Toronto, another fellowship in Syracuse, NY and then practicing here in pediatrics as a reconstructive surgeon since 1997.

If you could go back in time and change something during your training, what would it be?

I don't think I would; I've been very lucky. I've had many mentors, many great people along the way. I never thought I'd get into volunteering until the twilight of my career - I'm very thankful that I have had an opportunity to volunteer my time so early in my career. For my first mission, I left my wife and my 5 kids at home -- all under the age of 10 -- to go to Bolivia. I'm very thankful for having that kind of support to start the journey that early.

How did you get involved with global surgery and Team Broken Earth?

Team Broken Earth was started by Dr. Andrew Furey, Dr. Jeremy Pridham, and me. We've always had an interest in giving back and doing volunteer surgery. I've been with Operation Smile since 2001 and have done many missions over the years, I can now share that experience of wanting to give back with local individuals as well as the medical community. I think the idea of giving back is a great concept because these people will come back home with a sense of community and rejuvenation that I think makes us all better people. And on top of that, it makes me become a better physician

and better surgeon because if I can deliver care in resource compromised environments such as Haiti, Guatemala, and Bangladesh, I can do it really well here because I have all the resources that I need.

Team Broken Earth has grown a lot over the past decade, what do you think is behind the sustained growth of this organization?

A lot of our team members across Canada have a connection to Newfoundland. Initially, we expanded organically. And over the years, we have grown to the organization we are today through making connections across the country. I'm really proud of Canadian training, in particular the training at Memorial University. A big thing for us is also education. We do a lot of education mentorship, and we really want to pass on that knowledge. Since the educational component is sustainable, it's important to us that all the team members have a teaching component here at Memorial University.

That's terrific, being able to mentor and train people in different countries and helping them to be self-sufficient.

And for us too, it's the exchange of culture. For example, we're doing a rural mission next week in rural Guatemala to do some primary care and identify patients that may benefit from surgical intervention. Then we have a great local partner on the ground so there's continuity of care, cultural sensitivity, and some corporate social responsibility on our part. And we're going back there in February with the surgical team to provide that surgical care.

What was your most memorable experience as a Team Broken Earth member?

It's hard to pin down to the most memorable because there's a lot of emotions surrounding that. There's been happy moments and there's also been very sad moments because you realize that we're very lucky in North America. We have access to good medical care, and so sometimes you see babies in countries with high infant mortality rates, high rates of HIV and lack of access to care. But if I had to pinpoint a happy moment, it's actually more of a general theme of what I love to do, because I love doing cleft lip and palate procedures. For me, it's a great operation that I can do safely in different environments, and it has a big impact right away. Cleft lip takes about an hour of surgery and that can make a lifelong difference to an individual, to a community, to a family. Cleft palate takes a little longer, about an hour and a half, but delivering and providing that care to somebody who may not be able to have it, whether it's here or internationally is a good moment for me.

If there was one thing about the current state of global surgery you could change what would it be?

If I could identify one thing, it would be access to care. For most of the world, trauma is one of the leading causes of loss of income, loss of life, loss of health. If we could improve access to safe surgical care, I think that would be a big thing because most of the world does not have safe surgical care. As well, there's a lack of social determinants of health such as safe water, safe food, safe housing across the world. If we can provide that or at least a starting point to that I think that would make a big difference.

You did a mission up in Labrador a few months ago and that got me thinking, are there gaps in surgical care that's unique to remote communities in Canada in particular?

I think the common themes are access to care and distance travelled. Our missions in Labrador are more educational. For example, in Goose Bay, we do a lot of first responder care. It's like an ATLS course, but trauma based. We work with the community and either Labrador Health or the Nunatsiavut government to identify what the need is and then respond to that. One good example is we did a course in Nain where it was essentially a diabetes/wound care course and we delivered that to their local community nurses because that's what they asked for. So, we found that whether it's Nain or whether it's other countries, going in, doing a needs assessment, and responding to what they say the need is, I find that's where we've been most effective.

What are some future aspirations you envision for Team Broken Earth?

Education and national exposure are our big focal points. We're a registered national charity and I'd like to expand that national scope across Canada and really work together to provide care in different areas. We had teams pre-COVID that were active in Boston so I would like to get more of an international flavor of teams as well. Because our heart is always in Haiti, one of the things that we're planning to do with regards to education is that we're going to bring a senior orthopedic resident from Haiti and train them in Saskatoon for one year. The goal is that the orthopedic surgeon is going to take the Canadian knowledge back to Haiti so that they can operate there at a level that they may not have had access to before.

I really like that; those are some big goals and I think you guys are starting a spark.

That's a good way of putting it. I found that people want to give and help others, sometimes they just don't know how to, or just need a platform. So anytime we've tried to put a team together, whether it's to go to the Gathering Place, partner with the Lions Club to provide free eyeglasses and eyecare or going to the Collaborative Clinic to help some of the Afghan refugees, these are all part of being in the community; I'm very proud that anytime we put a call for help, we have team members that are ready to go. I think that speaks to their heart of Team Broken Earth and I really like the idea that they want to give back.

Is there a piece of advice that you'd like to share?

I don't hand out advice, though I will say that you can learn from other people's experiences. For instance, I never thought I'd be here ten years later talking about a Canadian national charity that we started. I'm very proud of what we've done. I guess the wisdom from that is, just do it if it's something you're passionate about. Don't feel like you have to wait until the time is right. If it's in your heart, just do it. I'm not saying it's not without heartache, struggle, and a lot of sleepless nights. But at the end of the day, if it's meaningful to you, it's probably meaningful to others and if you go out there and do it, you'll find like-minded people.

Is there anything you'd like to say to the readers?

I've been very lucky in that I've had the opportunities along the way through the support of many different people. I have to say I couldn't have done it alone, it's with many people helping me, so thank you to them.