

Spreading good health

Peanut butter makes a difference

The name Project Peanut Butter sounds like a school activity. But, in fact, it's a revolutionary method for saving thousands of children that was instituted by pediatrician Mark Manary.

The member of Gethsemane Lutheran Church, St. Louis, along with his wife, nurse Mardi Manary, made a two-year mission trip to Tanzania. In 1994 he started working with a new medical school in the small southeastern African country of Malawi. He learned that the recovery rate for malnourished children who received hospital treatment was about 20 percent. He believed that number could be better.

"We could stop children from dying but rarely could we get them to recover," Manary said. "We needed to try a home-based therapy so we could get the kids out of the hospital where they did nothing but lie near other sick kids and pass germs around."

Manary discovered a food product from France that has peanut butter as a primary ingredient. Mixed with vitamins, milk powder, sugar and oil, the foodstuff constitutes a complete meal. In one year the 20 percent recovery rate jumped to 95 percent. Manary then worked to replicate the peanut-butter product and found a similar recovery rate. A year later, during a food shortage, the new treatment went head-to-head with methods by major relief agencies with the same, overwhelmingly positive results.

The way the treatment works is that when a trained village health aid spots a malnourished child, he or she gives the family the peanut-butter food, with directions to feed the child 250 grams a day. The treatment continues until the child gains enough weight.

Though there were skeptics early, Manary's discovery now is lauded. Last year the U.N. System Standing Committee on Nutrition, the World Health Organization and UNICEF issued a joint statement establishing the doctor's protocols and formula as the most effective way to treat severely malnourished children.

The Manarys founded Project Peanut Butter (www.projectpeanutbutter.org) to raise funds to buy ingredients for the product.

COURTESY OF PROJECT PEANUT BUTTER



Pediatrician Mark Manary talks with a Malawian mother about the peanut-butter product he developed that helps children recover from malnutrition.