

Bernard Kouchner—Founder of Doctors Without Borders

MARC A. SHAMPO, PHD, AND ROBERT A. KYLE, MD
Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN



Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, delivers emergency medical aid to victims of armed conflicts, epidemics, and natural and man-made disasters and to others who lack health care because of social and geographic isolation. The organization was founded in 1971 in France and currently has an international network with sections in 18 countries. In 2001, Sweden issued 2 stamps (Scott No. 2418a) to honor the organization. The issuance of these stamps provides an opportunity to honor the founder of MSF, Bernard Kouchner.

Bernard Kouchner was born on November 1, 1939, in Avignon in southeastern France, about 50 miles northwest of Marseilles. He grew up in the suburbs of Paris, where his father was a physician. While growing up and being educated, Kouchner was influenced by the works of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and poet Louis Aragon (1897-1982). In 1964, Kouchner received his MD degree and subsequently became certified as a gastroenterologist.

In 1967, Biafra, a region in eastern Nigeria, seceded from Nigeria and proclaimed its independence, which prompted a civil war in the region. With about 50 of his medical colleagues, Kouchner traveled to Biafra in the summer of 1968, where, as part of the International Red Cross, he tried to provide medical aid to the suffering population. When Kouchner returned to France in early 1969, he speculated on the problems of the conflict and voiced his disagreement with the International Red Cross and its policy of not interfering in the politics of the warring countries.

The civil war (and ensuing famine) in Biafra resulted in the founding of GIMCU (Groupe d'Intervention Medical et Chirurgical d'Urgence, or Emergency Medical and Surgical Intervention Group). A second disaster—a flood due to a tidal wave in eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh)—led to the establishment of SMF (Secours Medical Français, or French Medical Relief). On December 20, 1971, MSF was born from the merger of GIMCU and SMF, with Kouchner as its first director. The MSF has essentially the same goals as the other

2 groups, that is, to bring food, medical supplies, and hope to the needy peoples of the world.

In late 1970, Kouchner cared for victims of an earthquake in Peru and the survivors of the Black September massacre of Palestinians in Jordan. He worked in Nicaragua (earthquake) in 1972, in Lebanon (civil war) and Vietnam (war) in 1975, and in Turkey (earthquake) in 1976.

Kouchner remained with MSF until 1979, when he left to form a new group, Médecins du Monde, or Doctors of the World. The goals of this group were essentially those of the previously mentioned organizations. The disagreement between Kouchner and MSF began with the Vietnamese refugee problem in 1979. Doctors of the World, founded in mid-1980, organized relief efforts in Afghanistan (civil war), Armenia (earthquake, 1988), Ethiopia (famine, late 1980s), Brazil (war with native Indians), and other Latin American countries (Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico), as well as in Poland, Burma, and Mozambique.

After Kouchner left MSF in 1979, the organization became more international. The MSF movement was born in France but was enriched by the organization of Belgian and Swiss sections in 1981, a Dutch section in 1983, and Spanish and Luxembourgian sections in 1985. Between 1986 and 1995, this expansion continued with the creation of supporting sections in Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

In about 1988, Kouchner began to be more political in his thinking than he had been earlier. He has served in several political posts in France, as France's first Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and later as French Minister of Health and has continued to exert pressure to allocate resources for the medical problems of needy populations throughout the world.

Kouchner has received many awards and honors, including the Dag Hammarskjöld Award (1979), the Louise Weiss Prize of the European Parliament (1979), the Athinai Prize of the Alexander Onassis Foundation (1981), and the Prix Europe (1984).

© 2011 Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research