

# **Atlantis Dialysis Focuses on Puerto Rico as an Ideal Vacation Spot**

**By Gordon Lore**

**For Patients Only**

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**N**ephrologist Otegbola Ojo, MBBS, FRCPC, DiplABIM, DiplABN, is a man on a mission—to help dialysis patients everywhere break away from their often daunting regimen of dialyzing three times a week in their local units, many of which are drab, uninspiring, almost warehouse-like structures, and going home exhausted. He wants them to “forget about dialysis” for awhile and embark on a journey to the Caribbean, where they can dialyze almost as an “afterthought” in beautiful surroundings shaded by palm trees waving gently in balmy sea breezes. Ojo wants his patients to be invigorated by the experience, not drained of energy with nowhere to go but home to rest.

## **A Nigerian Transplant**

**O**jo graduated in 1978 from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Following postgraduate training at the University College Hospital Ibadan in 1980, he was “transplanted” to Canada, and continued his training at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. In 1984, he earned a fellowship in the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons (RCoPS) of Canada. He is also a diplomate of the American Board of Internal Medicine. In 1986, he received his Certificate in Nephrology from the RCoPS and a diploma from the American Board of Nephrology.

Ojo is the founding nephrologist and medical director of the Regional Dialysis and Nephrology Service, Oshawa, Ontario. Begun in June 1991, the program now has over 250 dialysis patients on various modalities, including hemodialysis (HD), peritoneal dialysis, and home HD. There are also more than 100 patients with advanced renal failure participating in the pre-dialysis phase of the program. Ojo remained as medical director until March 1998.

Prior to the Oshawa program, Ojo began his pioneering work in nephrology service development by establishing the Regional Dialysis and Nephrology Service in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, Canada, headquartered in Kelowna. He directed this program from its inception in 1986 until he began the program in Oshawa. During the time period, he developed all aspects of in-center dialysis and clinical nephrology as well as managing home dialysis treatments for those patients who lived too far away from the center. He has been actively involved in nephrology, diabetes, hypertension, and stress medicine, and was a partner with Nephrology Associates, a group of nephrologists who care for more than 1.5 million patients in Southeast Ontario. He has continued a very active clinical research involvement in these specialty areas.

### **Island Dialysis and the Lost Continent**

In 1997, Ojo began to realize his dream of providing dialysis patients with an “escape route” from their regular dialysis units to a tropical vacation in the Caribbean. Under the business umbrella, Atlantis Healthcare Group, Inc., he established Island Dialysis, also known as Atlantis Dialysis.

Ojo named the overall enterprise for the fabled lost continent of Atlantis. While some scholars believe Atlantis was destroyed thousands of years ago and sank into the sea in either the North or Central Atlantic or the Mediterranean, others believe that, since some of the Caribbean islands

do not fit a particular geographical pattern, this may indicate that a sudden cataclysmic event may have destroyed most of the continent while leaving some scattered remains. While Ojo wants to try to give patients the feeling they may be very near the sunken continent, “the whole idea is to have a good time” and “forget about dialysis.”

“Our message is that patients are in the Caribbean for a vacation,” Ojo said in an interview with *FPO*. “They are not there for dialysis. They have to be able to take their dialysis for granted, to free their minds so they can enjoy their vacations and not have to worry about dialysis. We do everything to ensure that their care is as safe and goes as smoothly as possible.”

### **Atlantis After the Fall**

**I**f the ancient continent does lie in ruins on the floor of the Caribbean Sea, the islands themselves do a thriving tourist business, and Ojo doesn't want dialysis patients to feel left out.

“About six years ago, I noticed that most of our patients had become very stable, but they did not feel as well as they should,” he explained. “We live in a different climate. During the winter, depression sometimes is a factor. Some patients wanted to get away, but didn't feel they could afford it. Most dialysis patients have the feeling of being tied down to a unit and have experienced life-threatening events related to their kidney disease. So, there is a fear of going to a place where patients may feel they are not getting the same quality of care they do at their home units.”

### **“A Critical Factor”**

**O**jo also looks beyond the needs of the patient to those of the caregiver.

“A patient's family can also feel they are trapped in the same limited situation,” he remarked. “If children are on dialysis, for instance, parents

may not feel comfortable taking a vacation and traveling somewhere else with them. If one spouse is on dialysis, the other spouse feels he/she cannot go somewhere. Therefore, the caregiver is a critical factor in caring for our patients.”

## **Creating “a Beautiful Environment”**

**O**jo said he began looking toward the south “where patients who live in a northern climate could go.” There are some lovely places in the Caribbean, and “they are even more beautiful in the winter because there is quite a marked contrast.”

“Our goal was to create a beautiful environment in the Caribbean for our patients,” the nephrologist stated. “Most places in the Caribbean, however, did not have the proper infrastructure to accommodate visiting dialysis patients. So, we had to go there and build self-sufficient facilities that would provide care that was equal to, or better than, the care provided in Canada, which, we believe, is comparable to any in the western world.

“We began a pilot project in Jamaica and acquired a cottage resort overlooking the sea and developed it into seven suites. It took a while to persuade the government there to let us do that because they were not used to something like this. It was unprecedented for them.”

## **Island Dialysis Units**

**A**tlantis/Island Dialysis units are located on the following four islands of the Caribbean:

- *Jamaica*. The main facility can accommodate up to 72 patients. Another smaller unit, part of a cottage resort in Ocho Rio, does not operate all the time, but can be reactivated if needed. The Arawak natives called Jamaica Xaymaca, or land of wood and water. The island extends from the summit of Blue Mountain to lush tropical forests to the

azure waters of Montego Bay. The Atlantis facility is located at the Half Moon Shopping Village at Montego Bay, “where dialysis care is provided in a beautiful setting on the coast.”

- *Barbados*. Calypso bands and the spirit of Carnival are popular here. It is a coral island with white sandy beaches. Island Dialysis is located at the Bayside Plaza, adjacent to the Grand Barbados beach Resort.
- *St. Lucia*. The local tourism agency said that “the Pitons, twin coastal peaks on the small island..., are bookends to a world filled with aged fortresses and small villages. Wild orchids, giant ferns, and hummingbirds share this lush tropical gem with the cool coral reefs and hot Creole food.” Island Dialysis is located at the Tapion Hospital on the picturesque Tapion Reef overlooking the sea at Castries.
- *Puerto Rico* (PR). On this large picturesque island, Atlantis currently has eight functioning facilities with 11 more under construction.

“[PR] is very accessible to Americans,” Ojo remarked. “It is also exotic and is just as beautiful as any of the other islands in the Caribbean. It costs much less for Americans because it is a territory of the United States. Therefore, Medicare pays for the dialysis treatments.”

## **Dialyzing in Puerto Rico**

**D**ialyzing in environs surrounding one of the oldest cities in the Americas can be quite an experience. Old San Juan, PR, was founded over 500 years ago as a military stronghold. It is now designated as a world-class historic site by the United Nations. It has over 270 miles of coastline and hundreds of beaches. The streets are paved with blue cobblestones cast from furnace slag, which was originally brought over as ballast on Spanish ships.

The sprawling El Morro Fort stands guard over San Juan Bay. Its thick sandstone walls rise some 140 feet above the sea. Construction on the six-level structure began in 1540, but was not completed until 1786. El Morro Walkway is “wedged between massive city walls and San Juan Bay” and “offers a romantic stroll back in time.” There are also plenty of

hotels in the city and on the island. Prices range from a low of \$59 per night to a high of \$4,500.

## **Puerto Rico Facilities**

**T**he following five Island Dialysis facilities comprise the majority of the Puerto Rican patients who dialyze there as well as travelers:

- *Manati*. Renown for its pineapple products, Manati, about a 25-minute drive from San Juan, boasts the Hacienda Esperanza, once the largest sugar plantation on the island. The 2,200-acre plantation is currently closed for renovation, but, when it reopens, it is expected to be “a premier attraction.”
- *Fajardo*. This is the eastern hub for the island’s touring and water sports activities. Attractions include Las Cabezas de San Juan, with a neoclassic lighthouse in continuous operation since 1882. The town is famous for its seafood and specialty restaurants. A “must-see” is Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve, which has “a stunning mosaic of tropical coast ecosystems.” Fajardo is also well known for sailing, snorkeling, and diving, and, at night, the Bioluminescent Lagoon sparkles with light.
- *Mayaguez*. There is the elegant Plaza Colon with fountain, benches, and a statue of Christopher Columbus. It has the only zoo on the island.
- *Aguidilla*. This town is located in the middle of the northwest part of the island. There is a golf course along the cliffs at the water’s edge, close to the Borinquen Lighthouse. There are also waterfront restaurants with spectacular sunset views over Mona Passage.
- *Ponce*. This second-largest city on the island was founded in 1692 by the great grandson of Ponce de Leon, the Spanish conquistador. Ponce is known as La Perla del Sur (Pearl of the South). A drive to the summit of El Vigia Hill affords a spectacular view of the mountains meeting the sea. Often called the Museum City,” Ponce is the site of the Muse de Arte de Ponce, which houses the finest collection of European art in the Caribbean. Everyone takes a turn or two around the La Guancha boardwalk. Surrounding the plaza are an intriguing mixture of colonial, neoclassical, Creole, and art-deco architectural styles. Ponce also offers

a Parade of Lights, where the streets are flooded with illuminated floats, cartoon characters, music, and baton twirlers. There are three additional new facilities in Puerto Rico located in San Sebastian (17 stations), Lares (seven stations), and Guaynabo (18 stations).

## **Puerto Rico Redux**

**T**he island of Puerto Rico is ideal for all kinds of outdoor activities, including strolling the beaches and boardwalks, biking, bird watching, swimming, diving, fishing, hiking, golf, horseback riding, kayaking, sailing, snorkeling, parasailing, and tours of such places as the only tropical rain forest in the US Forest Service system.

The Karst region of the island is very beautiful and rugged, reminiscent of areas of New Zealand. It has been described as looking like “a lunar landscape smothered in tropical vegetation.” The emerald-colored water of Dos Bacos Lake is like “an exotic journey up the Amazon.”

## **The Headquarters Staff**

**O**jo is the founder and president of Island Dialysis, and Iosif Ciosa is the marketing director. Joseph William Carter, RN, is vice president of Operations. While all three are based at their headquarters in Oshawa, Canada, they are also frequent visitors to their units in the Caribbean and are always concocting new ways to make the experience of their dialysis patients a more pleasant one.

The Puerto Rican operations are under the leadership of Roberto Hernandez, MHSA, and Judith Lugo, RN, BSc.

“We bring the outdoors into the clinics so the patients feel they are really in the tropics,” Ojo said.

## **Connecting with Atlantis**

**M**any patients learn about Atlantis Dialysis through the media, brochures, other publications, and an Internet website. There are some walk-ins, but, mostly, social workers at dialysis units “tend to organize trips for patients.”

“When patients call, we immediately respond,” Ojo stated. “We send brochures, including pricing and the cost of dialysis. After that first contact, those who wish to book will sign a document, which permits the unit to provide the required information, including the dialysis prescription, immunization status, and any unusual condition the patient may have such as hepatitis. We abide by universal precaution measures and have isolation rooms. To maximize our infection control, we do not reuse any disposable products and have all our staff immunized against hepatitis B. We are able to handle pretty much any patient...”

“We have patients from many countries, including Japan and Brazil. We also have many European patients [along with] Canadian and US visitors. We have brochures in four languages—English, Spanish, French, and German.”

A patient’s physician must certify that he/she is stable enough to travel. Of the three dialysis cruise programs Atlantis conducted in 2001, 50%-60% of the patients arrived in wheelchairs, and two even brought along their oxygen tanks.

“Everyone enjoyed themselves,” Ojo opined. “There was casino playing and dancing. These days, there is little that can truly restrict someone from traveling.”

Ideally, patients should start making travel arrangements more than two weeks before the scheduled departure date, but Atlantis has been able to accommodate patients who called only three days before the date of departure. Because of frequent medical events in the life of a dialysis patient, if a patient cancels within two weeks of the trip because of health reasons, he/she can receive credit for a future trip.

## **Out to Sea... Again**

**W**hile Atlantis Dialysis is not currently conducting dialysis cruises, it plans to return to it soon. Ojo believes such travel can rejuvenate patients and again make them once more feel an integral part of life around them. Ojo said his patients keep asking when he will conduct another dialysis cruise. The nephrologist personally had gone on every cruise “to make sure everything went well.” He hopes to have a dialysis cruise plan in place sometime in 2003, possibly even by the end of winter.

“We want to try to link up with reputable cruise lines that have the desired ambience,” Ojo remarked.

The nephrologist had used Celebrity Cruises, where he could set up four dialysis stations in a single room, and “we really want to do it again because it is an important travel option for patients.” Ojo said he is in negotiations with Holland America Lines. He added that dialysis cruises are an even more important travel option now that many travelers are more leery of air travel following the events of September 11, 2001. The nephrologist plans to keep expanding in the Caribbean. He even hopes to add centers to a few islands owned by the French government in the Dominican Republic and wants to increase his activities in Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.

### **“Come to the Islands”**

**W**hat words of wisdom does Ojo have for dialysis patients who want to travel?

“Come to the islands, have a great vacation, and forget about dialysis,” he reiterated. “Leave that to us. We want patients to understand that travel is now within their reach. The anxiety about receiving good dialysis while away from home is no longer an issue. Dialysis patients in

the US can now go to Puerto Rico and enjoy a real tropical vacation without substantial out-of-pocket expenses for treatments.”