

From Chicago to Iraq

An obstetrician and gynecologist gained a unique perspective through her service to others both abroad and at home.

Kina Peppers, MD, knows what it means to give back.

A retired Lieutenant Colonel, Dr. Peppers served in the Army Medical Corp for 24 years, including two tours of duty in Iraq. Stationed at an air force base in Balad, Iraq in 2006 and 2009, she was asked to reach beyond her specialty of obstetrics and gynecology and provide primary and emergency care to those in need.

“I saw a lot of everything, not just OB/GYN,” says Dr. Peppers. “We had both male and female patients and all different types of cases. There was diabetes, high blood pressure and a lot of trauma--from injuries sustained diving into a swimming pool, to those incurred to someone hit by a mortar outside the gate. Everything you can think of.”

While at the base’s women’s clinic and a primary care clinic, she treated U.S. and coalition military forces and contractors. As an on-call physician for the trauma hospital, she provided life-saving treatment for those patients, as well as civilians and even Iraq combatants accompanied by armed guards. With the closest gynecologist located 400 miles away in Baghdad, women were helicoptered to see her with emergencies such as ruptured ectopic pregnancies, ovarian cysts or hemorrhaging from a miscarriage.

Treating such a diverse patient population in areas beyond her training opened her eyes. “I want to stress two words: cultural competency. I think an experience like this helps to diversify you as a physician. Regardless of cultural differences, everyone has a story, a family. When you sit and listen and talk to people, you learn who they are. You have to dig a little deeper inside to get those wheels turning to understand who a person is and how to give them the best healthcare you can.”

To create a sense of normalcy while on her second tour in 2009, she trained for the Chicago Marathon. In the sweltering desert heat, she participated in a half marathon in memory of 9/11, as well as several other races benefiting Fisher House Foundation, which provides lodging to military families while a soldier receives medical treatment. She finished her tour and returned to Chicago just one week before the marathon and was able to run it with her husband.

Upon arriving home, Dr. Peppers wanted to make a difference locally and give back to Chicago. She returned to Chicago Family Health Center on the city’s South Side, a community health center that cares for uninsured and underinsured patients. Growing up on the South Side herself, she considers the six years she spent with the center an honor. She says it was an amazing experience to give back to the community that was most influential to her early development.

She says that serving this uninsured, culturally diverse population further taught her the importance of communication and how listening to each patient as an individual is the only way to solve challenges and provide the best care.

“You are forced to look at things a little differently,” she says of her time at the clinic. “Everyone isn’t insured, but everyone needs quality healthcare. You do your best to give them everything

you have, but sometimes your hands are tied – by insurance or wait times for specialty services – and you learn to look for alternatives for the same problem.”

Regardless of whether you are practicing medicine in Iraq, Chicago or anywhere else, she feels the most important thing you can do is establish a rapport with the patient. Upon joining the medical staff at Northwestern Memorial in 2011, she also became a clinical instructor of Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. In that role, Dr. Peppers helps her colleagues pass this message on to the next generation of physicians.

“Each of us brings something different to the table, different experiences based on our culture,” says Elena Kamel, MD. “We try to teach this important expression to our residents and medical students but it’s not an easy thing to teach. Dr. Peppers received on-the-job training – a trial by fire – and by sharing, she can help others learn how to break down barriers to create a bond of trust.”

Dr. Peppers encourages any of her Northwestern colleagues to spend time volunteering their services for patients in need outside of the hospital walls.

“When you sit down and talk to someone, that’s when you actually find out what they are really like,” she says. “You might be prescribing medication that they know they won’t take or that they know they can’t afford but are embarrassed to tell you that. But by taking a little time to find out a little about your patients as a person, then you can tailor care designed for them.”

Dr. Peppers is an obstetrician and gynecologist on the medical staff at Northwestern Memorial and an instructor of Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. She is a member of the Women’s Group of Northwestern – the city’s first all female practice.

Elena Kamel, MD, an obstetrician and gynecologist on the medical staff at Northwestern Memorial, an associate professor of Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology at Feinberg and the Managing Partner of The Women’s Group of Northwestern.