

N.C. physician takes on medical mission to Iraq

By ANNE BLYTHE
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH — Randall Williams grew up in North Carolina and thought he was familiar with the names of most towns.

So when his wife told him several years ago that a colonel was calling from Qatar, he racked his brain on the way to the phone. He could not think of a nook or cranny in this state that bore that name.

TARHEEL
OF THE
WEEK

"My wife said, 'I don't think it's North Carolina,'" Williams recalled recently.

The colonel, a world away in the small Arab emirate bordered by Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, needed medical as-

sistance. Would Williams, an obstetrician and gynecologist with a private practice in Wake County, be willing to join a group of British and American physicians in Iraq to help improve the health-care system?

"Sure," Williams responded. "I didn't hesitate. That's what doctors do — we help people."

That call helped launch a health-care project that was awarded a \$3 million grant from the U.S. State Department this month. The project is meant to foster monthly visits to Iraq by U.S. doctors and international training opportunities.

Williams plans to head to the Middle East in April for a third trip to a wounded Iraq that he cannot, and will not, turn his back on.

The inaugural visit was in February 2004, nearly 11 months after the U.S. invasion and not long after the colonel's plea for help.

"Iraq had a horrific health-care system," says Williams, 50. "We call it the Rip Van Winkle effect. Literally, it had been asleep 30 years — educationally, not just technically."

The doctors affiliated with the Medical Alliance for Iraq hoped to help Iraqi physicians, and ultimately the patients they see, through training.

The American and British doctors would share techniques and equipment with the Iraqi physicians left behind in the fast-changing world of medicine. The



Dr. Randall Williams plans a third trip to the Middle East to help Iraqi physicians.

STAFF PHOTO BY LESLIE BARBOUR

SEE TARHEEL, PAGE 2B

TAR HEEL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

visitors would encourage them to form medical specialty societies where ideas could be shared and worldwide connections could be tapped.

"It is good for Iraqis to see people like Randy," says Maha Alatar, an Iraq native and former UNC-Chapel Hill neurologist who was on the trip. "There is a war going on, and a lot of what they see are American soldiers. There are a lot of Iraqis who are trying to build a country, and people like Randy are trying to lend a hand. I look at him as a different type of army, as an army of peace, an army of hope."

That first trip to Baghdad was just a beginning for the persevering physician. The infant mortality rates in Iraq were abysmal, among the worst in the world. Babies born at 7 and 8 pounds, and otherwise healthy, were dying from sepsis, or blood poisoning.

Williams knew things could improve, but Baghdad had become more and more dangerous for Westerners. Also, Iraqi physicians were being targeted by kidnapers, snipers and others.

The U.S. doctors focused on the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, and Erbil, the world's oldest continuously inhabited city.

It was safer there, so Williams and Martin E. Olsen, director of obstetrics and gynecology at East Tennessee State University, put on a conference that drew nearly 100 physicians from across Iraq.

RANDALL WILLIAMS

AGE: 50

HAILS FROM: Born in Concord, raised in Burlington, lived in Chapel Hill through college, medical school and his residency, moved to Raleigh in 1989.

EDUCATION: UNC-Chapel Hill, bachelor's degree in history and zoology, 1979; UNC-CH medical degree, 1984.

FAMILY: Wife, Elizabeth; sons Steele and Watt; daughter Timmons.

BOOKS ON THE NIGHTSTAND: "The Aeneid" by Virgil, the new edition translated by Robert Fagles because of the parallels with what's happening in Iraq; "Portraits in Leadership: Six Extraordinary University Presidents," by Art Padilla at N.C. State University; the Bible; just bought "Clapton," the biography of rock star Eric Clapton.

ATHELETICS: He runs six miles a day and takes long bicycle rides on the weekend.

TESTING THE SPORTS ALLEGIANCE: Now that his son is signed to play soccer at N.C. State, the Tar Heel fan has joined the Wolfpack Club.

PROFESSIONAL TIES: Member of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, the N.C. Medical Society, the Robert Ross Obstetrical and Gynecological Society, and the Wake County Medical Society, of which he is a past president.

MEDICAL INTERESTS: Infertility, pre-conception counseling, health concerns in athletes and perimenopausal medicine.

With laparoscopic equipment that had never been set up before, the obstetricians showed their eager audience how to do minimally invasive surgery.

"Randall's a great teacher," Olsen says. "He's calm, cool and collected."

A benevolent spirit

Williams, a Concord native who was brought up in Burlington, knew at 4 years old that he wanted to be a doctor. By 9, he was pestering his mom to take him to a biological supply store in his hometown for frogs he could dissect.

As a teenager, he was banging on the doors of Memorial Hospital in Alamance County, trying to get any kind of job he could. He

started as the only male candy-striper, joining the other volunteers clothed in red-and-white-striped uniforms to deliver cards and cheer.

After his first year of college, Williams was old enough to be an orderly. "I eventually reached the pinnacle of my career there," he says jokingly.

While in medical school at UNC-Chapel Hill, Williams met Watty Bowes, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology who influenced the direction of his career and fashion sense.

To this day, Williams wears bow ties to honor the mentor who led him into a field where he would deliver 2,400 babies in Wake and Orange counties.

Williams stepped away from the labor room in 2001 but continues work at his fertility practice.

Bowes, who moved to Chapel Hill from Colorado, recognized a benevolent spirit in Williams almost immediately.

As a fledgling doctor doing his residency, Williams would spend his week of vacation in Haiti, doing surgery in the island's rudi-

mentary hospitals.

"Randall's work in Iraq is typical of this interest he has in serving humanity in so many ways," Bowes says. "He's a Tar Heel from top to bottom. This state should be proud of him."

George DeLoache, a Raleigh real estate broker who has known Williams for 40 years, says his childhood friend lives at a pace many would consider frenetic.

They joke that a trip to Atlantic Beach, where they both have houses, is like going to Camp Randall.

"He doesn't even need a house at the beach," DeLoache says, "because he's always on his boat, fishing, running, going over to the community center to work out. He'd be incredibly stressed by inactivity."

But Williams, with his unruffled demeanor and community-minded spirit, is reminiscent of a different era.

"He's an old-fashioned doctor," DeLoache says. "You can get him on the phone at night and he'll still make house calls. I don't know a guy who's more public-service minded."

An upbeat fellow who does not seek accolades for his work, Williams is always quick to mention a colleague or a mentor who helped him get where he is.

Williams named his middle son after Bowes. Watt, 18, a Broughton High School soccer star, is headed for N.C. State University.

'This [family] is Iraq'

In the office of his practice off Six Forks Road in Raleigh, Williams talks excitedly about the achievements of Watt and of his older son Steele, a college sophomore, and his daughter Timmons, a cross-country star at Broughton.

Without skipping a beat, he talks about the Iraq he knows — not the bombed-out building shells

and battle-scarred countryside often shown by the media.

"To me, this is Iraq," Williams says as he holds up a picture of a family he has gotten to know.

The picture is one Williams likes to show as he talks to civic groups and makes presentations with the American Bar Association on the rule of law in Iraq.

On his laptop, the doctor clicks through photos of the high security wall he used to run past in Baghdad. He talks excitedly about the meals and coffee he has shared with families there, about the youngsters he took soccer balls to and a sightseeing trip that led him past the Tigris River.

An elder and Sunday school teacher at White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, he keeps a Bible on his bedside table. His hosts knew about his strong faith and pointed to a place as they passed the river.

"That's where they do the procedures," Williams recalls their telling him.

As a physician, he was a little concerned. What kinds of medical procedures were the Iraqis doing in the river, he wondered. Then he realized his guides were showing him where baptisms took place.

Most of the doctors Williams works with in the war-weary country have the wherewithal to leave. But they stay.

They stay because they care, Williams says, and that alone keeps him committed to a project that could help change the world. He will continue to work with the country for as long as he can.

"I think history is on the side of those who work nonviolently toward peace," Williams says. "That's not a platitude, that's me the historian stating the historical reality."