

Life- Changing Work

How one organization—with the help of a White Plains Hospital physician—is improving women’s health in Rwanda.

BY MARISA IALLONARDO

WHEN DR. RUTH BARROW, an OB/GYN at White Plains Hospital, heard from a colleague about taking part in a program in Rwanda to work with medical professionals there and share her knowledge on Cesarean sections, she jumped at the chance. “I had always wanted to go with one of these organizations in the past,” she says, “but I had small children and family responsibilities, so I wasn’t able to.” But with her daughters now in college, the timing was right.

Helping others has always been important to Dr. Barrow. She’s worked in inner-city communities and underserved areas, and she says she wanted to “go to another country and see how best I could provide the services and knowledge that I have.”

So, in May 2019, Dr. Barrow set off with a group from the International Organization for Women and Development (IOWD) on one of their trips to Kibagabaga Hospital in Kigali



From left: OB/GYN, Ruth Barrow, MD; Urologist, Stephanie Kielb, MD; Rwandan OB/GYN Resident, Irakoze Magnifique, MD; and OB/GYN, Lee Ann Richter, MD

(the capital city of Rwanda) to take part in the organization's Hands-On Cesarean Section Program.

HELPING WOMEN

The IOWD was founded by Barbara Margolies in 2003. At the time, Margolies was teaching for the U.S. State Department in Niger and became aware of the devastating impact that obstetric fistulas were having on women in the country.

An obstetric fistula can occur when the tissue breaks down between the vagina and either the bladder, uterus, or rectum during childbirth—with the most common instances occurring between the bladder and the vagina, explains Dr. Barrow. A fistula can happen as a result of prolonged labor and its complications, a complication from a C-section, or an infection. It can cause a lot of discomfort, and if left untreated, potentially have serious complications including bacterial infection that can result in sepsis.

For Margolies, discovering that a group of women with fistulas were living in the courtyard of a hospital in Niger after having been turned away by their families and forced to leave their homes proved to be a turning point. Even though she had no medical background, she says she knew she had to do something about it.

Soon, Margolies started IOWD, a nonprofit organization, and visited Niger regularly with groups of urogynecologists/pelvic floor reconstructive surgeons who are specially trained to perform fistula-repair surgery. The organization worked in Niger for seven years before political unrest resulted in a move to Rwanda, where they've been working since 2010.

MAKING AN IMPACT

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, a group of around 35 volunteer physicians and nurses from across the U.S. went to Rwanda three times a year for two-week stints. Volunteers pay their own way. "Whatever money we raise is literally going to the program and not to overhead," Margolies explains.

While there, Dr. Barrow also met with her fair share of surprises. There were power outages, limited supplies, and basic equipment that sometimes malfunctioned. There were cases of undiagnosed twins, ruptured uteruses, and postpartum hemorrhage. As a group, they worked diligently to provide the best possible care. The work there has been life-changing—and Dr. Barrow talks about how the patients often expressed their gratitude. She explains that "the patients spoke mostly their dialect of French. And the staff of course, assisted in translation. They were just always very thankful."

The hands-on C-section program is just one of the organization's programs having such a life-changing effect. Fistula repair not only impacts a woman's health but also their social and economic lives. Margolies tells the story of a mother of four who worked with her husband selling homemade beer. After developing a fistula, the woman had to step away from the business. After IOWD physicians performed surgery to fix the problem, she could then go back to her village and resume helping her husband. "And her whole economic situation changes for the better," Margolies explains. "So her kids



Above: An IOWD anesthetist working with Rwandan anesthesia nurses. **Right:** Kibagabaga Hospital



have the proper food; they can go off to school; and they don't have to help the husband. [The surgery] changes everything."

SHARING HER SKILLS

The organization has since expanded to other medical services, like pediatrics, as well as the C-section program that Dr. Barrow took part in. The aim of that program, which launched in 2018, is to help cut fistula rates by working with and exposing Rwandan medical students, residents, general practitioners, and consultants to various C-section methods and techniques.

For Dr. Barrow, the experience was extremely rewarding. "It was humbling to work with the team—they were so appreciative, so polite, so nice," she says.

And Margolies says Dr. Barrow was a perfect fit for the program. "She came in with so little equipment, in a dark, poorly lit operating room," says Margolies. "And she just took over. Nothing phased her. She did it with a smile—and she taught."

Dr. Barrow had planned to volunteer again in May 2020 but was sidelined by the pandemic. Margolies hopes the program can resume in person this October after having offered a virtual component the previous summer. She also wants to expand the C-section program and is hoping to have more OB/GYNs join on future trips.

"It's become my heart and soul, truthfully," says Margolies. "The relationships that I have made have been incredible." And in learning about a culture, she has found that while there are differences, there are so many similarities, as well. "We women have the same problems; we have the same feelings; we have the same fears; we have the same joys," she says. •