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Pediatric chief resident heads to Africa to help battle HIV outbreak

DALLAS – May 16, 2006 – A UT Southwestern Medical Center chief pediatric resident and her physician husband will join 52 colleagues from around the nation as part of an enterprising effort to establish a series of clinics in southern Africa to treat HIV-infected children.

Dr. Amy McCollum will be one of a handful of doctors manning a clinic in Swaziland, a country of about 1 million people situated between South Africa and Mozambique. The clinics are part of an effort called the Pediatric AIDS Corps, designed to bring medication and treatment to the growing population of HIV-infected children.

“I think most of us go into medicine with a desire to help people,” said Dr. McCollum, who practices at Children’s Medical Center Dallas. “The problem with HIV and AIDS that exists in Africa is the largest health problem of our time. We are very excited about the chance to advocate for those afflicted with this terrible condition.”

Only three native pediatricians care for the roughly 500,000 children in Swaziland. In the United States, there are 106 pediatricians for every 100,000 children.

“Most of the HIV programs that have been up and running throughout Africa in recent years have focused more on adult care than pediatric care. There are many children that have yet to be tested for the virus,” Dr. McCollum said. “The Pediatric AIDS Corps gives us the exciting opportunity to provide resources to families so they can get care for their children.”

Her husband, David McCollum, is a recent graduate of the UT Southwestern internal medicine residency program. He will work in the Swaziland clinic as well, taking care of the HIV-positive parents of the children served there. The couple will take their 16-month-old daughter, Molly, with them as well.

The Pediatric AIDS Corps doctors should arrive in August 2006 after a month of specialized training.

Dr. McCollum said she first became drawn to Africa after visiting Zimbabwe as a

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sophomore in college.

“I really fell in love with the continent and particularly southern Africa, the people, their hospitality and their warmth,” she said. “But I also was exposed, probably for the first time in my life, to the large disparity between the rich and the poor that exists in Third World countries and to the problems of access to basic health needs – clean water, functioning sewer systems and similar things we take for granted in the United States.”

She hadn’t yet decided on a medical career at the time, but resolved to return to Africa one day. After 10 years of school and medical education, she returned to Africa in 2004 as part of a church mission.

“Between 1995 and 2004, HIV had just exploded,” she said. “I was able to see first-hand the change in the continent by seeing fresh graves and speaking with end-stage AIDS patients who had never been given the chance to be placed on anti-retroviral medication. We went to an AIDS orphanage and saw malnourished babies whose parents had died from the disease. These images are burned in my mind, and they are images I am unable to forget.

“Unless you actually go over and see for yourself, it is so hard to get a feel for the gravity of this problem. More people need to go and come back and be vocal about what they see. There’s a whole generation of children that aren’t going to reach adulthood if someone doesn’t intervene.”

Dr. McCollum attended Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., and the University of Mississippi Medical School, graduating in 2002. She completed her pediatric residency last June and is serving as a chief resident through June 2006.

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