Global Medical Health Hero Visits OUWB

An award-winning physician and medical director of Ethiopia for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Rick Hodes, M.D., MACP, visited Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine (OUWB) to share more than 20-years worth of global health experience with the medical students. A forum of 100 people watched his slide presentation that included before and after images of the patients who have sought his help at the Mother Teresa Orphanage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Hodes recalled the stories of these patients, their illnesses and their outcomes to illustrate the range of ailments he diagnoses. The examples riveted his audience as he described how one girl's tumor would have crushed her brain if left untreated; a boy's spleen that had grown to the size of a basketball, and one woman's oral tumor that was the size a bowling ball on the lower part of her mouth. She never ate in public because of the unusual way she fed herself. Hodes found a world-class surgeon in Germany to help her.

"His presentation was inspiring and made me realize that each doctor can really make an impact on a patient," said Cassandra Hastings, a first-year OUWB medical student.

Hodes relayed to the students that technology is key to his work. He uses the World Wide Web for research and to contact physicians around the globe for assistance.

"I use email to reach medical experts. It’s nice to be introduced to them but that’s not always possible," explained Hodes. "I have to keep on my toes because I never know what I am going to see. I set up Google alerts when I want to learn about a disease."

Inquiring minds

Many of the students wondered why his patients waited so long to see him. He answered that Ethiopians first rely on local healers and do not completely believe in Western medicine. Because many years pass before they come to the clinic, the conditions have progressed into the advanced stages of heart disease, spine disease or cancer.

"Driving through the streets of Ethiopia is like driving through a medical museum," said Hodes when a student asked him how citizens of Ethiopia react to those who have deformed spines and overgrown tumorous growths. "The spine patients are ridiculed and marginalized. They have bad self images, especially the girls."

When he was a medical student, these weren’t the patients he thought he would be treating. In fact, before he even pursued medical school, Hodes earned a degree in geography and hitchhiked to Alaska. His educational path eventually led to Middlebury College and University of Rochester Medical School as well as training in internal medicine at Johns Hopkins University.

"What you think you want to do when you’re done with medical school may not be what you actually end up doing," shared Hodes.

A reason to stay

Hodes launched a spine surgery program and specializes in helping patients recover from tuberculosis of the spine and scoliosis. He explained to the students that some patients have spines with 220-degree curves, in other words, shaped like a saxophone. This year, he has assisted with 2,000 spine cases. His impact in this area is the reason he remains in Ethiopia.