David Holmes, MD, brings the best of care to Buffalo’s inner city at Home

A WORLD OF NEED, AT HOME

Long before he had completed his residency in family medicine at UB, David Holmes knew that he wanted to care for the underprivileged—the poor, the uninsured and patients without access to medical care.

The question of where to practice was the hard part of the equation. For a time, Holmes deliberated between a Third World country, like Ghana, where his parents had served as missionaries, or rural America, like the Cajun country outside New Orleans, where he’d completed a medical school rotation.

The inner city didn’t even make his list. “I had no desire to be there,” he recalls. “The crime, the pollution, the congestion, all the buildings next to each other—that just turned me off.”

Fifteen years later Holmes is still in Buffalo, where he practices at Kaleida Health’s Niagara Family Health Center on the city’s Lower West Side.

As it turns out, it’s just where he was meant to be.
People say, ‘They have access—they can go to the emergency room.’ But it’s still not good quality of care because there’s no prevention going on. It’s just treating one crisis after the other. — David Holmes, MD

“It’s funny how things work out differently than you expect,” says Holmes, clinical assistant professor of family medicine in the School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. “The last place I was thinking of was urban America, but I really enjoy it here. It’s a win-win situation. I am rewarded by my patients and others in my community whom I serve, and they get something out of it, too.”

Last June, Holmes was rewarded yet again for his commitment to the undererved. From a field of physicians nominated by patients and colleagues, the New York State Academy of Family Physicians named him the 2007 Family Physician of the Year. Although he had not yet been selected for the title of American Family Physician of the Year in 2008, Holmes was among five finalists narrowed down for that honor.

In winning the state award, Holmes received widespread recognition for medical service that extends well beyond the borders of his day job. As president of the Western New York chapter of the Christian Medical and Dental Association, he recruits local physicians for the Good Samaritan Referral Network, a group of specialists willing to waive or reduce their fees for poor patients.

He also serves as the volunteer medical director of family medicine services at Good Neighbors, one of two free medical clinics he helped found. The other is Cornerstone Manor, Buffalo City Mission’s shelter for women and children.

"His medicine is how he serves." This is how Lara Warkentin, PhD, director of Cornerstone Manor, sums up Holmes’ commitment to the city’s neediest patients. "He certainly has the energy and vision for what should happen in this community," she says. "A lot of people talk about these efforts and applaud them, but he’s willing to put his money where his mouth is."

**TRAINING AND ONGOING RESOLVE**

You could say that giving back is who Holmes is; however, because Lucy was chief resident, she stayed on for a fourth year. While waiting for her to complete her training, David took a job as medical director of the Bailey Family Health Center on Buffalo’s Lower East Side, a clinic that Erie County Medical Center closed and Holmes—David at Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital and Lucy at Women and Children’s Hospital.

**COMMUNITY SPIRIT**

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After graduating from Stanford, Holmes married his college sweetheart, Lucy Hung. The two attended the University of Vermont College of Medicine, where they used their clinical electives to explore areas of medicine—and the world—that intrigued them. After a rotation at a rural clinic outside New Orleans, the couple traveled to China. There, they learned about acupuncture and other traditional medical practices; in their free time, they visited Lucy’s birthplace, Taiwan.

After that, they were off to Kenya, where they worked in a 60-bed hospital equipped with a small lab, a few medications and little else. "It didn’t have any X-rays, and there were no EKGs. There were often more patients than beds, so they had two patients in a bed. It was a big eye opener," Holmes says.

The lack of basic supplies and resources was frustrating, he further recalls, and seeing patients suffer because of it was heartbreaking. Among them was a 10-year-old boy who came to the hospital with symptoms consistent with polio. "It was definitely had times when I said, ‘Is this really true?’ And then I just found that people with faith seemed to be a lot happier and had a whole lot more purpose in their life. Without some kind of faith, life seemed meaningless. It was in a state of being of meaning and purpose, so I decided to really commit and follow the example of my parents and others." After graduating from Stanford, Holmes married his college sweetheart, Lucy Hung. The two attended the University of Vermont College of Medicine, where they used their clinical electives to explore areas of medicine—and the world—that intrigued them. After a rotation at a rural clinic outside New Orleans, the couple traveled to China. There, they learned about acupuncture and other traditional medical practices; in their free time, they visited Lucy’s birthplace, Taiwan.

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“Many patients have spiritual beliefs that affect their health and well-being,” says Rosenthal. “He’s able to help patients by reflecting back to them how that story has impacted where they are today, and how they might modify their future for better health.”

Holmes’ work with the underprivileged serves as a model to medical students and faculty alike, Rosenthal adds. “He grew up a child of missionaries, and the value of serving basically defines him. He’s a committed individual with perspective. His family’s important, being knowledgeable about medicine’s important, but being knowledgeable about the patient’s own particular situation is also important to him.”

Last winter, Holmes was able to combine quality family time with the medical service that has characterized his career. Carrying on his parents’ tradition, he embarked on an unconventional vacation with his wife, Lucy, now an associate professor of clinical pediatrics, and their four children, ages 12, 9, 6 and 4. For several days they worked in makeshift medical clinics set up in various sugarcane villages in the Dominican Republic. “That was a lot of fun. We had to bring our stethoscopes and any medications we thought we were going to need because they didn’t have anything. Our older sons worked with the team pharmacist, and he taught them how to dispense medications. And when he left, our sons took over the pharmacy department, which was basically a table in the corner.”

While he was there, Holmes learned that the Dominican Republic guarantees its citizens health care but doesn’t make the same pledge to the Haitian immigrants who harvest the sugarcane. As he considered their plight, he wondered how much he could do for them in just a week’s time. Then, while examining a patient, he discovered that the boy had a hernia. He referred him to the volunteer surgery team, and the patient’s hernia was repaired a day later. “I’m not sure what would have happened otherwise,” Holmes says. “But I do know he would have suffered.”

Once again, Holmes seems to have found himself right where he was supposed to be.