

ALUMNI NEWS

Johnson relates experiences working in South African clinic

By Cliff Despres

Imagine living in a town where about one-third of the population has HIV/AIDS.

This is reality in the South African town of Vaalwater, where UT Southwestern Medical Center alumna Dr. Jennifer Johnson recently spent three months working in a clinic and seeing firsthand how AIDS is obliterating a community.

"HIV in Africa is the medical war of our time," said Dr. Johnson, a 2003 graduate and Dallas resident.

To help bring these people the care and treatment that could save their lives, Dr. Johnson became the first participant in a clinical fellowship program between UT Southwestern and the Waterberg Welfare Society, a nonprofit organization that runs the South African HIV/AIDS clinic. Dallas philanthropists Linda and Mitch Hart launched the program with a generous gift to UT Southwestern, and the Wilson Education Foundation – founded by renowned Dallas interior designer Trisha Wilson – funds the clinic.

The fellowship is the first of its kind for UT Southwestern and the region.

"This is a great opportunity for UT Southwestern to help fight the AIDS epidemic," Dr. Johnson said.

The clinical fellowship, which calls for assignments of three months to a year, is headed by Dr. R. Doug Hardy, assistant professor of internal medicine and pediatrics, and gives physicians the chance to help South Africans afflicted with HIV/AIDS.

Fellows do medical care, counseling, testing and physical exams at

local clinics and a government hospital, and even in homes.

Dr. Johnson said she found it a daunting but rewarding effort.

Last fall, she spent nearly three months in Vaalwater, a city just north of Johannesburg. In Vaalwater, an estimated 30 percent of the 20,000 residents have HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Johnson frequently treated infected people who had CD4 counts of less than 10. In healthy people, a typical CD4 count, which measures the number of infection-fighting T cells in a blood sample, is between 500 and 1,500. People with low counts are much more susceptible to diseases such as tuberculosis and meningitis.

AIDS is the No. 1 killer in South Africa, and it's not hard to see why, she said. Social stigma deters people from seeking help, and a "cultural lack of urgency" hurts, too, Dr. Johnson said.

"We see mothers put their babies at risk of getting HIV by breastfeeding because their parents are pressuring them. The mothers would rather give their children HIV than tell their parents that they themselves have the virus," said Dr. Johnson, who lived during her fellowship on a farm owned by the hospice's director, Dr. Peter Farrant.

Health care is poor in Vaalwater, which is located in Limpopo Province. The local government clinic has a physician available only one day a week, and the nearest government pharmacy with antiretroviral drugs is more than 100 miles away.

"HIV has a huge impact on the health, economy and social structure of South Africa," said Dr. Johnson, who worked to increase the number of people who seek help from the



DAVID GRESHAM

Dr. Jennifer Johnson (second from left) talked recently about working in a South African clinic. On hand to hear her were Mitch and Linda Hart (on either side of Dr. Johnson), whose donation funds the clinical fellowship program, and Trisha Wilson (second from right), whose foundation funds the clinic in which Dr. Johnson worked. At right is Dr. Robert Hardy, who leads the program.

Waterberg clinic. She visited homes, encouraged pregnant women to undergo HIV counseling and testing and helped provide antiretroviral drugs to infected babies.

Many South Africans benefited from her presence, including a 38-year-old man who came to the clinic for an HIV test. He tested positive for the disease and also had oral lesions and pneumonia. He did not qualify for government medication, but Dr. Johnson and the clinic helped start him on antiretroviral drugs that could

help him survive.

"He would have been someone who definitely would've died without our services," said Dr. Johnson, who returned to Dallas and is working as a hospitalist before she begins a pulmonary critical care fellowship at Vanderbilt University in July.

When she made a presentation on campus in December, talking about her South African fellowship experiences, the Harts were in attendance to thank her for her efforts.

"You are really a trailblazer.

You changed a lot of lives there," Mr. Hart told her.

The Harts' \$150,000 donation covers a stipend, insurance and immunizations for participating physicians. It's a project they decided to champion after traveling to the hospice and seeing the devastating poverty and disease in the area.

Doctors who are interested in participating in the program may contact Dr. Hardy or visit the program's Web site, www.utsouthwestern.edu/southafricaclinicalfellowship.html.