Wright State's Lifespan Health Research Center Broadens the Investigation of Human Variation

By Mark Willis

When U.S. battlefield casualties had to be evacuated from Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993, the wounded soldiers were prepared for the long flight to Germany by a specially trained Air Force medical team known as a staging squadron. The doctors operated what amounted to a makeshift emergency room on the edge of the airstrip as an Air Force jet transport waited for take-off.

The staging squadron didn't make it into the best-seller Black Hawk Down, a minute-by-minute account of the 15-hour battle that left 18 Army Rangers dead and more than 70 wounded. That oversight will be corrected in a forthcoming book by William Hurd, M.D., the new chair of obstetrics and gynecology at Wright State University School of Medicine.

In a fast-paced, multi-dimensional career that combines general obstetrics/gynecology with reproductive endocrinology and basic research in the physiology of the uterus, Dr. Hurd also has become one of the U.S. military's leading authorities on staging for aeromedical evacuation. A colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, he is chief of professional services for the 445th aeromedical staging squadron based at Wright-Patterson AFB. Last year, the 445th was rated the best staging squadron in the U.S. Air Force, which transports more patients longer distances than anyone in the world.

Dr. Hurd is editor of Medical Aspects of Long Distance Aeromedical Evacuation, which will be published later this year by Springer-Verlag. The book includes specialty-by-specialty chapters written by Army, Navy, and Air Force physicians. Dr. Hurd wrote its chapters on obstetrics/gynecology and staging. Although it may not be a best-seller like Black Hawk Down, the book is likely to be the final word on a new global strategy for treating U.S. combat casualties.

"Military planners no longer expect to set up hospitals in a theater of operation such as Mogadishu," Dr. Hurd explains. "The plan now is to treat casualties initially with medics on the ground, then transport them long-distance to regional military hospitals.

"Air evacuation is a harsh environment," he continues. "It's dark, noisy, and cold inside the airplane. When you put a hundred patients on a plane, it can be dangerous medically if they're not ready for it. Our book is about what the physician needs to think about when treating acutely injured patients who are being transported long distance."

Dr. Hurd was appointed as the Nicholas J. Thompson Professor and Chair of Wright State's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology last August, succeeding the late John J. Halki, M.D., Ph.D. He came to Wright State from Indiana University, where he served as professor and director of the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology.

Dr. Hurd holds a combined M.D./M.Sc. degree from the University of Alabama School of Medicine, where he was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Society.

He completed an obstetrics/gynecology residency at the University of Cincinnati and a reproductive endocrinology fellowship at the University of California, San Francisco. Dr. Hurd is certified in obstetrics/gynecology and reproductive endocrinology and infertility by the American Board of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Between his residency and fellowship training, Dr. Hurd served four years as an Air Force obstetrician/gynecologist at Vandenberg AFB in California and Bitburg AFB in Germany. He remembers Bitburg, when he and a colleague delivered 60 babies a month, as his most challenging clinical time.

"I consider myself to be a general obstetrician/gynecologist who did a fellowship," Dr. Hurd says. "I have continued to do general gynecology and take obstetric calls throughout my career, even when I ran invitro fertilization clinics at the University of Michigan and Indiana." He plans to continue the wide-ranging practice as he teaches Wright State residents and medical students.

He also plans to pursue a fascination with basic science that began when he was a medical student. The author of more than 80 papers and book chapters, Dr. Hurd is one of about two dozen obstetrician/gynecologists nationwide who has an active RO1 research grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Now located at the Cox Institute, his lab has had continuous NIH funding for a decade. In recent years the research has focused on the cellular mechanisms affected by magnesium sulfate, a common treatment for premature contractions during pregnancy. "If we can figure out how magnesium sulfate works, maybe we can find better ways to prevent premature labor," he says.

Chairing a medical school department is a career move that Dr. Hurd has worked toward steadily for years. In addition to administrative duties at Michigan and Indiana, he has completed advanced management training at the USAF Air Command and Staff Air War College and the U.S. Army War College. He is confident that administration will fit with the other dimensions of his career. "The biggest challenge is, I keep finding interesting things to do, and there is so little time to do them."