

Dr. Aref Rifai: Into the eye of the storm

Pensacola eye doctor returns from war-torn Syria

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It's no exaggeration to say that Dr. Aref Rifai's recent visits to war-torn Syria have taken him into the eye of the storm.

The Syrian-born Pensacola ophthalmologist has just returned from his third medical missionary trip to the Middle Eastern country, gripped for the past two years by a devastating civil war.

Rifai, 47, is the first American-based eye doctor to perform surgeries in hospitals located in two northern Syria towns in territory currently held by the Free Syrian Army, the rebel group trying to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

While insisting his forays into Syria are safe, he won't reveal, for security reasons, where the hospitals are located.

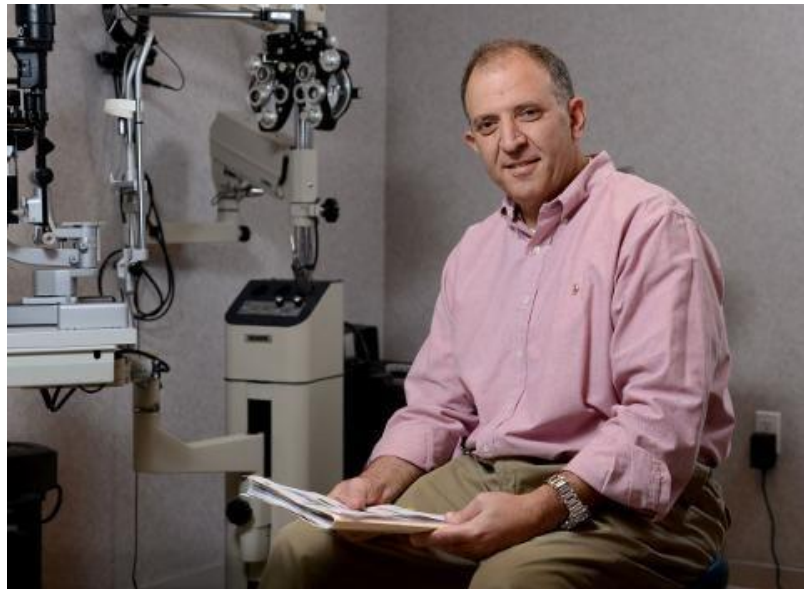
For one of the hospitals, I would spend the night in Turkey, wake up and cross the border, spend all day doing surgeries and then cross back into Turkey before the border closed at 8 p.m.," he said.

The other hospital was too far into Syria to commute, so he spent nights in the hospital.

It was no vacation, he said. I didn't see anyone, I didn't go out to eat, I didn't do anything but treat patients, do surgeries and sleep."

During the week Rifai was in Syria, he spent about half his time operating on patients who had suffered violent injuries, such as shrapnel wounds to their eyes or retinal damage from an explosion.

I did 18 surgeries while there, he said. One day I worked 24 hours, almost non-stop."



Dr. Aref Rifai Interview: Syrian born ophthalmologist Dr. Aref Rifai talks about his travels to Syria where he has been volunteering his services amidst a civil war.

Rifai works with a U.S. organization called the Syrian American Medical Society, a group of physicians donating money, supplies and expertise to aid refugees and civilians.

Part of a team of 18 eye doctors who rotate in and out of Syria on a weekly basis, Rifai said the experience, although exhausting, was so emotionally moving it kept him going.

All the nurses in one of the hospitals where I was working commented that I was the oldest surgeon there and wondered how I kept going, he said. I told them I'm only here two or three days and I'm going to take care of as many patients as I can."

Family effort

Rifai, a partner at the Pensacola eye clinic Center for Sight, is scheduled to go back to Syria in September for another week of eye surgeries.

Married and the father of two college-age sons, Rifai's efforts to help the Syrian people have become a family affair.

In March, during his first visit to the area, he was accompanied by his sons, Faysal, 21, and Freddie, 19, who were on spring break, and his 73-year-old father, Faisal Rifai, a Detroit resident and former dean of engineering at Syria's Aleppo University.

Syria's largest city, Aleppo has been the scene of intense fighting between government forces and the Free Syrian Army.

Our first trip in March was a humanitarian visit, Rifai said. We wanted to visit Syrian refugee camps in Turkey and see the situation on the ground for the civilians. And we were able to accomplish that on the first trip. It was an eye-opener."

Faysal, a senior at the University of South Florida, said he went because he loves Syria.

We used to go every summer after school ended, he said. I don't think I ever spent a summer in the U.S. It's always been Syria where we would see friends and relatives. Since the revolution started, we haven't been able to do that."

'Eyeopening'

Rifai and his sons spent their March trip in the Turkish refugee camps along the Syrian border to get a sense of the existing conditions on the ground.

It was an experience that was terrifying, eyeopening and inspiring to me, said Freddie, a pre-med student at the University of Miami.

Dad was taking in medical supplies and we were there to observe. We wanted to go there and find projects we could focus our efforts on. Before we went I thought we'd see how awful it was there. But when we got back I felt good about everything we saw."

Rifai and his sons returned from their March trip encouraged by all the international aid flowing into the refugee camps.

I would love to go back and help out again, Freddie said.

A second trip to Syria in May really opened my eyes to the dire need for medical care that has been lacking for a lot of the civilians, especially for eye care, Rifai said.

On that trip he took his wife, Rasha, to show her he was safe there.

During the May trip Rifai worked with Syrians and international aid organizations to help set up equipment in the two hospitals that were largely insulated from the conflict.

On his third trip in July, Rifai joined a group of dedicated U.S. and U.K. physicians who volunteered to travel to a Syrian border town and provide health care to refugees and civilians.

Often, Rifai gets asked why he's taking time from his Pensacola practice to enter the fringes of a dangerous civil war.

I'm originally from Syria, he said. I grew up there and it's something I can do to help. Some people are sending checks. Some are sponsoring orphans. So, I do feel that if I can help by volunteering and taking care of people until things settled down, then that's the extent of my contribution."

Home again

Rifai grew up in Aleppo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, famous for its archaeological ruins.

Before the war began in March 2011, Aleppo had more than 2,000 physicians. Today, Rifai said, there are less than 100 and only three ophthalmologists.

During his most recent stay in Syria, Rifai treated and operated on scores of patients, but there were two that left a lasting impression on him.

One Free Syrian fighter had sustained a significant injury to his face and lost an eye, Rifai said.

He was asking me about what it would take to get a fake eye because he had planned to get married after the war ends and he wasn't sure his future bride would accept someone with only one eye."

But it was a little girl's plight that hit Rifai's heart the hardest.

One child I was examining had lost an eye as a result of an explosive injury. She also had lost an arm. She was 6 years old.

She asked me a question. She said, 'Well, doctor, I am now 6 years old. As I start to grow and get bigger aren't I going to have my arm grow back on again?'

It really hit me hard to know it is those children that will bear the scars of this conflict.

That little girl will live the rest of her life with that amputation and will remember it was because the Syrian people were trying to get back their freedom and dignity.”