During voluntary tours of duty as an Army medical officer for Operation Iraqi Freedom—Camp Spearhead, Shuauba, Kuwait, in 2003 and Forward Operating Base Warrior, Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2009—Dr. Charles L. Garbarino kept family members and friends informed about his experiences by typing e-mails and scribbling other thoughts in a diary.

When he returned home from his second tour of duty, those same family members and friends asked him to write a book about his experiences as a pediatrician who cared for soldiers in the combat zone.

“People said to me, ‘you have to write a book,’” said Dr. Garbarino, a colonel in the New Jersey National Guard who practices pediatrics in West Orange, N.J. “They’d say, ‘Your e-mails were so touching and they brought out so many emotions. You made us realize what war really is; you have to tell your story.’” I said, ‘I’m a street kid from Brooklyn and you want a street kid from Brooklyn to write a book?’

A friend introduced him to Marc S. Goldberg, a writer who helped him sift through those e-mails and diaries to assemble “Pediatrician Soldier: The Man the Kids Call ‘Dr. Charlie’ Goes to War” (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse.com, 2008).

Presented in essay form, the book includes Dr. Garbarino’s candid thoughts about what it means to be deployed as a soldier; the pediatrician’s role in caring for a soldier in a combat zone; postdeployment medical care; how posttraumatic stress disorder affects soldiers and their families; the impact of deployment on the family structure; and the role civilian pediatricians can play in caring for children of deployed soldiers.

A palpable theme throughout the book is the importance of bringing compassion to all aspects of medical care. In Iraq and in other theaters of combat in the Middle East, he explained, “you make a difference every single day.”

“Physicians have to realize that just holding someone’s hand is just as important as anything else,” said Dr. Charles L. Garbarino, pictured in Kirkuk, Iraq, during one of his two tours of duty. “I think, is paramount. Physicians have to realize that just holding someone’s hand is just as important as anything else.”

A self-described "nonsensical kid from Brooklyn, Dr. Garbarino refuses to consider himself a hero for the service he provided on those two tours. "The real heroes are all the fallen soldiers and those who have come back emotionally, physically, or mentally traumatized," he emphasized. "Those are your heroes, as are all the people those soldiers left behind when they went to war. There is one hero in my family. It’s not me; it’s my wife, Lydia.”

He went on to note that when soldiers return from deployment, “We all return changed. I had some PTSD when I returned. One day, I was sleeping and I woke up in a cold sweat, saying, ‘I gotta get it! I gotta get it!’ I finally realized I was home, and that what I was reaching for was my fauna. I’ve been okay, but so many soldiers are coming back with physical problems such as missing limbs, or they’ve been mentally traumatized. They hear somebody drop a box and they duck.”

All royalties from “Pediatrician Soldier” benefit Our Military Kids, an organization that provides support to children of deployed and severely injured National Guard and Military Reserve personnel (www.ourmilitarykids.org).


By Doug Brunk

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