

# Healing the World

BY ERIN DYM

How our internationally minded staff are making Mount Sinai a truly world-class hospital



Dr. Rachel Spitzer

**D**r. Rachel Spitzer has it all: a Master's degree from Harvard University, a thriving obstetrical practice at Mount Sinai Hospital, a supportive husband and a new baby.

But it isn't enough. She won't rest until others have more too. As a Global Health Scholar with Mount Sinai's Peter A. Silverman Centre for International Health, Dr. Spitzer, 32, devotes a significant proportion of her energy to improving obstetrical care in Kenya, Africa.

"My goal is to improve the capacity and quality of reproductive health care in Western Kenya," explains Dr. Spitzer, who spends two months a year overseas. Today, clad in her green hospital scrubs, Dr. Spitzer is on duty in the Labour and Delivery Unit. Her pager rings every few minutes. She answers each call promptly, confidently issuing health-care directives to nurses and residents, ensuring that every mom and baby receives outstanding care.

In her international endeavours, she works closely with Dr. Alan Bocking, Chief of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Mount Sinai. They bring Kenyan doctors and medical students here and send ours to Kenya to improve educational opportunities in both directions. Dr. Spitzer has recently led an initiative to send some of Mount Sinai's outdated but fully operational ultrasound machines to the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Kenya to provide doctors with access to this vital equipment. Currently, the hospital does not have any ultrasound machines on its labour and delivery unit.

It's just one of many differences between health care in Canada and Kenya.

"In Canada, we have a maternal mortality rate of 6 in 100,000 live births. In

Kenya, 400 mothers in every 100,000 deliveries die as a result of pregnancy or delivery complications," she says. "Eighty per cent of pregnant women see the doctor just one time during their pregnancy. Sixty per cent deliver in a health-care facility, leaving room for serious complications for women who labour at home. There is less access to good emergency care and more severe complications, such as fetal malformations, that aren't discovered until birth, and there is no pain control during labour."

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For Dr. Spitzer, this isn't acceptable. "Health is a human right. We live in a global community and this is an issue of social justice. We are so fortunate to enjoy such an excellent level of health care that I believe we are obliged to assist people in other parts of the world. Mount Sinai has so much capacity and knowledge that we are in a luxurious position to help."

Working with five other American universities, Dr. Spitzer and a team at Mount Sinai have identified three areas of interest for their program in Kenya: to reduce rates of cervical cancer, the number one cancer killer of women in the region; to improve maternal morbidity and mortality rates; and to prevent obstetric fistula, a severe consequence of inadequate care in which excessively long labour (of many days' duration) results in a fistula, or hole, developing between the birth canal and the bladder

and/or bowel. This can lead to the death of the baby as well.

Dr. Spitzer and her colleagues are trying to help Kenyans overcome these challenges, and they are becoming world leaders in this international initiative. Yet reproductive health is just one area in which Mount Sinai and its Silverman Centre have emerged as leaders. Since its establishment in 2002, the Silverman Centre has provided Mount Sinai staff with the infrastructure and coordination to advance global programs and change best practices in other nations. Global Health Scholars crisscross the globe and specialize in fields that span the health-care spectrum, from mental health and geriatrics to lab medicine and medical and nursing education.

"Our scholars are extraordinary," says Abi Sriharan, Deputy Director of the Silverman Centre. "They are devoted to their patients in Toronto, but are also focused on social responsibility and know that what happens in other countries affects us. They want to ensure that health care around the world is delivered in an effective manner. They are helping to position Mount Sinai Hospital as a world-class academic institution."

Though their efforts are changing medical practices and outcomes across the world, it's all in a day's work for Mount Sinai's staff. "There is so much more work to be done and so much knowledge to share," says Dr. Spitzer. "I'm happy to do what I can to help."

*For more information on the Silverman Centre or to donate to our international initiatives, contact Michael Anthony at the Mount Sinai Hospital Foundation at 416-586-4800 ext. 2955 or [manthony@mtsinai.on.ca](mailto:manthony@mtsinai.on.ca) ✨*