

Physician's Passion Helps Improve the Lives of Victims of Sex Trafficking

Kay Simmons

Wisconsin physicians work to improve the health of their patients every day. At the same time, there are physicians whose efforts extend well beyond their day-to-day practice, making an even bigger impact on the lives of their patients, their communities, and the world.

Gloria Halverson, MD, is one of those physicians. She began her medical career by forging new paths for women and has continued to use her medical training to help poor and abused women find health and a better way of life. Doctor Halverson was honored as the Wisconsin Medical Society's 2018 Physician Citizen of the Year for her commitment to the medical profession and to helping victims of human trafficking both locally and internationally.

When she began medical school in 1969, women faced many barriers to becoming physicians. But with persistence, intellect, and the ability to question and take on the establishment, Dr Halverson not only became a physician leader but also made history as the first married woman admitted to Marquette Medical School and the first woman obstetrics/gynecology resident at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

After completing her medical degree in 1973 and her residency in obstetrics and gynecology in 1977, Dr Halverson continued to break ground by becoming the medical director of the Maternal Infant Care Project at the City of Milwaukee Health Department and served on the State of Wisconsin Maternal Mortality Committee for two decades.

And while she has held numerous leadership positions throughout her career, it was her work to help victims of sex trafficking that led to her recognition as Physician Citizen of the Year.

"There are myriad roles she has played as a physician and contributor to society, but in my opinion, the most important is her work to help victims of human trafficking and how she brought together resources, experience, medical care, technology, and her undeterred attention to these suffering, shackled poor," said Kesavan Kutty, MD, in his nomination.

In the early 1990s, Dr Halverson became

with House of Hope, a vocational rehabilitation program for women and their children leaving the world of prostitution and human trafficking. The teams provide medications and medical services in pediatrics, gynecology, dentistry, physical therapy, ultrasound, laboratory, pharmacy, and ultrasound.

On her first visit to Nicaragua, Dr Halverson learned that cervical cancer is the leading

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—Gloria Halverson, MD

involved in international relief work when she began working with the World Relief agency and with Global Health Outreach (GHO) and House of Hope in Nicaragua.

"My husband and I have always enjoyed doing global health work. I was a board member of the Christian Medical and Dental Association, and every few years they hold a meeting out of the country," she said. "I went to a meeting in Nicaragua and we stayed for a week to work at a rescue shelter called House of Hope and my heart was broken. I was so appalled and my eyes were opened to a world I'd never seen before. I didn't realize sex trafficking involved between 21 and 27 million people in the world, mostly women and children. It just changed the whole trajectory of my life. Before we left I knew I'd be back."

Since that first trip to Nicaragua, Dr Halverson has led 11 medical teams that have partnered

cause of cancer and cancer deaths in that country, and it was significantly higher among this group because the women were not only forced into prostitution at a very young age but are forced to have as many as 30 to 40 sexual partners a day. What's more, since 90% of Nicaraguan women never have a pap smear, these women do not have access to early screening and treatment.

To combat this situation, Dr Halverson established a program to screen with one-hour turnaround pap smears, followed by screening abnormalities with colposcopy and treating precancerous lesions. To date, more than 1300 pap smears have been administered and countless lives have been saved.

Dr Halverson said women report back to other women in the brothels that they were treated with kindness and skill, which has led to women lining up at the bus pickup site in



Gloria Halverson, MD, of Milwaukee was honored with the Wisconsin Medical Society's 2018 Physician Citizen of the Year Award for her efforts to provide health care and education to women who are victims of sex trafficking, internationally and in the United States.

the early morning hours in hope of getting a ticket to see a doctor. When the health care teams visit, they also help draw women to House of Hope.

“We go into the brothels ourselves to invite them to clinic when we first arrive, and many come to learn of House of Hope programs for the first time. There are always women waiting to move into House of Hope after we leave,” said Dr Halverson.

Through House of Hope, the women are taught they are of worth; they are given training in basic life skills such as getting along with others, parenting, and cooking nutritious food. They join a microenterprise program that gives them job skills and their children are sent to school—the first formal education in many of these families. Microgrants are available to start businesses. After completing the program, which can take three to five years, the women may graduate and are given a small house and supplies for the business they have chosen. Graduates now go to brothels throughout Nicaragua, and to Honduras, Bolivia and Guatemala, working with women there to let them know they don't have to continue living as they have, and that help is available.

For Dr Halverson and the other medical team members, the growth they see in these women each time they visit is great encouragement.

“Most remarkably, two daughters of graduates—who otherwise would have continued

RESOURCES

Polaris Project:

<https://polarisproject.org/>

National Human Trafficking Hotline:

888.373.7888

HEAL Trafficking: Health, Education, Advocacy, Linkage:

<https://healtrafficking.org/>

a life in prostitution—are attending medical school, and the medical teams have been sponsoring one young woman,” she said.

Encouraged by these results, and under the auspices of GHO, Dr Halverson also has started a cervical cancer screening program for prostitutes in Mumbai, India, and similar programs are scheduled to start in Guatemala and Honduras.

Her passion in this area has led her to serve on the international board of House of Hope and serve on the *Trafficking in Persons Commission* for the Christian Medical and Dental Association. She has been one of four authors of an online curriculum for physicians to learn how to identify and treat trafficked victims. She has also coauthored a chapter in a medical school textbook about human trafficking, and has lectured locally, nationally, and internationally to student and medical groups on this topic.

While Dr Halverson is passionate about helping women and children in other countries, she is quick to point out that human trafficking is just as much of a problem in the United States, and right here in Wisconsin, as it is overseas.

“There is just as much for physicians in Wisconsin to know about this issue. We tend to think about it as being ‘over there,’ but trafficking has been found in every single county in Wisconsin. I guarantee it is in your area if you are a physician practicing in Wisconsin,” she said.

“Physicians can help to turn the tide on trafficking, and the first step is to educate themselves, their hospitals, and staff,” she added. Numerous resources are available to physicians to help set up protocols and to better understand the warning signs and victims' needs. (See box for resources).

“It is imperative that physicians know the warning signs. We need to know what the women look like, what their histories are like, what their needs are when we do the physical exam, what the physical findings might be and, most importantly, after becoming aware you need to have a protocol in your system for assisting them because these women need so much. You need to assemble a team before they walk in the door because you may be their one chance for rescue,” said Dr Halverson.

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