

Boulder gynecologist passionate about preventive care in developing nations

By Sean Bacon For the Camera Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

DailyCamera.com

02/10/2013

Dr. Lisa Lepine is no ordinary gynecologist. Most doctors may be fine with the daily in-and-out of helping patients, but Lepine craves more. Specifically, bringing care to communities in developing countries.

"It was just so heartbreaking," Lepine, a Boulder physician, said of a trip to Kenya. "They would have two women per cot, and the cots are these narrow, single cots and all around them are their children. These are women who are essentially in their 30s and 40s dying of cervical cancer while their kids are just hanging out in the hospital with them."

According to the Annals of Tropical Medicine and Public Health, cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers among the women in many developing countries and it is estimated that around 83 percent of all the new cases of cervical cancer and 85 percent of all the deaths from the disease occur in developing countries.

"It's just heartbreaking, and part of why it's so heartbreaking is that it's so preventable," said Lepine. "In the United States, if someone has precancerous cells in their cervix we do a procedure called a LEEP. It shaves those cells right off the cervix and then they're done. It's an office procedure, it takes 15 minutes.

"And, in many places of the world they just don't have access to that. So rather than taking care of it when it's precancerous, it goes on to being cancerous and people die at a very young age."

Lepine, a member of the humanitarian committee for the American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology (ASCCP), traveled to Rwanda over the weekend with other ASCCP members.

"In Kenya I did a similar mission, which was to go with the ASCCP and to teach their local physicians how to do colposcopy -- which is the evaluation of abnormal cells on the cervix, and then how to do LEEP if they needed to," she said prior to leaving Boulder.

On a mission in Rwanda, "They were given colposcopy and LEEP machines by a nongovernmental humanitarian agency and they said, 'Great, but we don't know how to use them,'" said Lepine. "So that was our role, to step in and give them didactic training in evaluation and management of these abnormal cells and then to actually give them hands on training."

Lepine said that she has been interested in international medicine since her two-year fellowship in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Since her fellowship, Lepine has traveled on medical missions to locations in Mexico, Bangladesh and Honduras.

"None of this has been a set plan. It has just been opportunities that I jumped at, because the need is great and what it feeds to me is great," said Lepine. "By teaching the local docs and letting them have some extra skills that they can use to help prevent cervical cancer; that will have a longer lasting effect."

"Studies have shown that if you teach women and give them some education, it elevates the health of the whole community. So, anything we can do that helps empower women to be able to take care of themselves and their family has a rippling effect."