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After 12 operations and facing amputation, a 7-year-old Iraqi boy finds hope in Marietta as he awaits...

A leg to stand on



Mohammad 'Babou' Mustafa, 7, and his dad Abdulqadr Mustafa, who are Iraqi but now live in Woodstock, show off the plastic support Mohammad wears to help compensate for the difference in leg length between his legs. He will have leg-lengthening surgery Thursday to hopefully correct the problem.



If he had remained in Iraq, the alternative for Mohammad Mustafa would have been amputation of his leg at the hip.

Mohammad's 'team'



Goodman Espy, 74, above an obstetrician/gynecologist at Marietta's ObGyn Associates, was in Iraq several



months ago performing humanitarian work when Heather Mercer, above, an American missionary who lives in Iraq,

contacted him about Mohammad. This is how Mohammad Mustafa wound up awaiting leg-lengthening surgery at WellStar Kennestone. Dr. William Terrell, inset, will perform the delicate surgery.

Mohammad to have leg-lengthening surgery

By Kim Isaza / kisaza@mdjonline.com

Thursday morning, a shy, wide-eyed little boy born in abject poverty will undergo surgery in Marietta that could well save his life.

Mohammad Mustafa has lived more than half of his seven years with a crippling, chronic bone infection that has made his left leg four inches shorter than his right. He hobbles around, wearing a plastic brace during the day, and although it doesn't seem to keep him from getting around swiftly, it's not a cure.

In his native northern Iraq, Mohammad has already undergone 12 operations. The next treatment for him there would be amputation of his leg, starting at the hip.

"We are in a high depression. We lost hope," Mohammad's father, Abdulqadr Mustafa, said through an interpreter. "After so many surgeries, he's in the same situation."

But after the limb-lengthening surgery the boy will undergo at WellStar Kennestone Hospital, "I trust that he will have a normal life," his father said.

It's rather serendipitous that Mohammad wound up in a Woodstock apartment, awaiting the surgery.

Goodman Espy, 74, an obstetrician/gynecologist at Marietta's ObGyn Associates, was in Iraq several months ago performing humanitarian work when Heather Mercer, an American missionary

who lives in Iraq, contacted him about Mohammad.

"She asked if I thought there was anything that could be done for him," Espy said. When Espy first saw the boy, he thought of his own children.

"There, but for the grace of God," Espy said. "I was overwhelmed by his smile, and very moved by the fact that this child with this disability, having little material things, could be such a happy kid."

He insisted that Mercer not let doctors remove the boy's leg. He began making calls, trying to find a way to help Mohammad.

Espy, who lives in Sandy Springs with his wife, Cheryl, has traveled on several occasions to the Middle East and Eastern Europe, where the average worker earns about \$100 per month, he said.

The Mustafas' hometown "has no sanitation system. No telephone service. No postal service," he said. "But these are very good people."

Later, back in the States, Espy himself needed to see a doctor. An avid marathoner, Espy had fallen and was being treated by specialists at Pinnacle Orthopedics in Marietta.

But his regular doctor missed one appointment, and Espy was seen by Dr. William Terrell. On the wall in Terrell's office were certificates noting his expertise in limb-lengthening surgery. A light bulb went off.

Espy asked for Terrell's help, and arranged to provide x-rays and photos of Mohammad's leg.

"It's an extremely difficult case," Terrell said. Mohammad "has so much bone that's missing, and the bone he has is infected and has been operated on so many times."

"He hasn't been walking on this bone since about age two, and the bone is soft and very small," Terrell said. "He would be in a wheelchair if not for the brace."

Terrell, 46, is one of only about 15 doctors in the United States who are trained in limb-lengthening and reconstruction, and specifically the Ilizarov technique, which was created in the former Soviet Union. He began performing the surgeries in 1997 and now teaches other physicians the intricacies of the work, which helps strengthen bone using a synthetic graft. (His Web site, www.xtremeortho.com, has a video demonstration.)

After the three-hour surgery set for early tomorrow morning, Mohammad will have rings around his leg with metal pins going through the skin. He'll be on crutches and will need extensive physical therapy to help the leg grow, Terrell said. He expects Mohammad's leg to recover at least two inches.

Mohammad and his father will stay in the United States for about nine months while the boy recovers. Mohammad's

mother and three older brothers remain in their two-room house in Erbil, Iraq. Mustafa, 43, said he was humbled by — and grateful for — all of the humanitarian aid his son is receiving.

"It's hard to show appreciation for all they've done for us," he said.

Although no one could give a ballpark estimate, the expense is clearly great. Espy, for one, has spent thousands of dollars out of his own pocket bringing the family here, and is covering Mustafa's lost wages during the time they are in the United States. (He also signed a federal document pledging his personal assets for any liabilities the family may incur while here.) Members of First Baptist Church of Woodstock have situated the boy and his father in an apartment, living with a new member of the church who shares their Kurdish ethnicity and language. WellStar is covering the expense of the surgery. Orthofix is donating equipment for the surgery, and Medtronic is providing the synthetic bone graft. And Terrell is lending his time and expertise, though he, like others involved, defers any credit.

"I'm not the hero," Terrell said. "I'm just a technician."

But like the others, he didn't hesitate to help.

"It's the right thing to do," he said.