

Newslines Iraq

'If someone lives, great. If not, it's God's will.'

Even if U.S. medics treat the wounded, civilian follow-up care can kill Iraqis

By Kelly Kennedy
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ASAD, Iraq — At the 399th Combat Support Hospital in mid-July, a soldier carried an impossibly tiny, malnourished 5-year-old boy into the emergency room with a gunshot wound to the stomach.

Every doctor and nurse's face registered a flash of sorrow, and they immediately converged to treat him. After the child had gone through surgery, the sorrow returned as doctors talked about the next stage of treatment: the Iraqi health care system.

"The Iraqi medical system was one of the best in the Middle East prior to the Persian Gulf War," said Col. Paul Astphan, acting commander of the unit. "Now they look upon their care as God's will.



RICK KOZAK/STAFF

Capt. Eric Departo, a registered nurse with the 399th Combat Support Hospital, monitors a 5-year-old Iraqi child who was shot in the stomach in Al Asadi, Iraq.

If someone lives, great. If not, it's God's will. That's the Iraqi health care system."

Statistics show 96 percent of Americans who make it to military hospitals in Iraq survive. But though the Iraqi soldiers, police

officers and civilians who come into American hospitals with the same life-threatening wounds will receive the same care, the civilian follow-up care — or lack thereof — could kill them.

At a Pentagon news conference

Sept. 6, Dr. Samir Abdullah Hassan, the Iraq Joint Forces surgeon general, said the Iraqi health care system continues to suffer a lack of doctors, people to teach new doctors and supplies. Hassan said Iraq has only 35 percent of the physicians the country needs, though he said he couldn't cite a total figure. The Iraqi army has 148 physicians and needs 600, he said.

"The health system is affected by the shortage of physicians, especially in unsecured areas," he said. "It's a countrywide problem. The government is thinking how to bring them back."

Security and better pay — doctors average \$300 a month in Iraq — are possible solutions, he said.

"We lost many lives because the medical care is not, you know ..." he said, pausing. "The medical care is not good."

A report released this year by the International Committee of the Red Cross states the hospitals are overwhelmed, and people are afraid to go to them because doctors and nurses are "frequently targeted." Security issues inhibit

supplies, and health care workers often can't get through checkpoints to work.

U.S. military doctors in Iraq agree. They say Iraqi medical personnel are scared to work in hospitals because they may be killed for not supporting the insurgents, or they take other jobs for more pay, or they can't get jobs because many were part of Saddam's Baath party.

Civilian hospitals lack supplies and are often dirty. Patients die from infection, or, one doctor said, through mercy killings, since people with amputations are often ignored and left to suffer because it's assumed they will die anyway.

Possibly more disturbing for the Americans are claims that Iraqis sent to the wrong hospitals — a Sunni to a Shiite hospital, for example — are being killed because of their sect.

But U.S. officials say Iraqis will not rebuild their health care system if they know they can go to U.S. facilities — a Catch-22 that

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