

Eminent doctor chooses service over retirement

Alice C. Chen, Special to The Chronicle
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Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle

The farther Dr. Arthur Ammann and his team of medical workers bounce along in their ambulance through rebel-held northern Congo to visit health clinics, the more uneasy he gets. The muddy roads are increasingly filled with men carrying automatic weapons, fleeing women and children, and bodies smoldering in the streets. In the midst of everything, Ammann encounters a smiling health worker sitting at a wooden desk who has been waiting two hours for Ammann and his team to bring HIV medications to her barren clinic.

The trip was three years ago, but Ammann still dreams about her. Perhaps she is still waiting, he imagines on the eve of the 21st anniversary of World AIDS Day. While the world's attention may fade after Tuesday, UCSF clinical professor Ammann, 73, remains vigilant every day of the year. He could have retired 17 years ago after receiving an abundant stash of stock options from Genentech. After all, his career is one of the most storied in modern science. He helped develop the first pneumococcal vaccine - which prevents the leading cause of bacterial death in children and has saved millions of lives - and also discovered two of the three ways HIV is transmitted.

But rather than spending his days on the beach or at his elegant Dominican Heights colonial home in San Rafael, Ammann created the nonprofit Global Strategies for HIV Prevention, which brings resources to some of the world's most neglected areas. Ammann's Global Strategies celebrates its 10th anniversary this year and with just two paid staff members - Ammann volunteers - the organization has raised more than \$22 million toward HIV prevention; trained 5,500 health care workers in countries like Haiti, China and Zimbabwe; and provided HIV testing kits or drugs to 85,000 women.

Ammann, who is married with two children and several grandchildren, has a pacemaker and has endured three unsuccessful back surgeries. He risks his safety, health and life for this work. Why does he do it? He believes that because he's been given much, much is required of him.

Ammann was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., the son of German immigrants. His father was a baker, his mother an au pair, and neither finished grade school. Every summer Ammann went to Ohio to work on his uncle's farm. His family was poor, but Ammann said he never realized it because their love was abundant.

After graduating from Brooklyn Technical High School, Ammann attended Wheaton College, where he studied medicine so he could help the most people from a variety of backgrounds. During his medical internship at New Jersey Medical School, he worked with physically abused children and determined then that he would specialize in pediatrics.

Ammann went to UCSF for residency in the 1960s and became the first pediatric immunologist at UCSF.

In the early 1970s, Ammann and his colleagues were the first to complete clinical trials resulting in FDA approval for the pneumococcal vaccine. Afterward, Ammann traveled the world to introduce the vaccine and learned a crucial lesson: Just because research exists doesn't mean it will help humanity - sometimes cost and government indifference can hinder its implementation.

In 1981, a new disease sidetracked Ammann. For some reason, children were showing up with immunodeficiency that was not genetic. After Ammann discovered the transmission methods of HIV, he went to Genentech in 1985 to develop a vaccine for the disease. Seven years of research led to five patents but no vaccine, so Ammann went to work for two influential AIDS foundations, setting research and public policy priorities and also securing grants like a \$15 million award from the Gates Foundation.

As the HIV epidemic came under control in the United States, Ammann noticed that the disease still ravaged other parts of the world. Many large organizations didn't have the agility or interest to focus on fringe areas, so Ammann decided to do it himself with Global Strategies.

In the past decade Ammann has traveled to dozens of remote areas in the Dominican Republic, Liberia, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, India, Cameroon, Botswana and Kenya. As medications have become more readily available, Ammann says, the next big challenge is to protect women and children who are now the majority of HIV victims.

He plans to advocate for stricter laws in some countries regarding rape, which ostracizes women and also transmits the disease.

Ammann also invests in the next generation of HIV activists.

"He reminds me to keep my research focused on questions that matter, so I'm not chasing a lab quirk," says Dr. Ted Ruel, a pediatric infectious-disease specialist at UCSF. "He serves as an inspiration and remains that go-to person for policymakers and foundations."

Just how long will Ammann work with Global Strategies? As long as his body holds up.

He recently read a book in which Thomas À Kempis tells God, "I'm tired."

God replies, "You've still got a lot to learn."

"I groaned out loud," Ammann says with a laugh.