



'Amazing': After weeks of treatment, AFTH releases 14-year-old mortar attack survivor

by Staff Sgt. Jake Richmond
332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

9/29/2009 - **JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq** -- The all-call came over the Air Force Theater Hospital loudspeakers at 11:45 a.m. on Sept. 17, 2009. It wasn't an emergency, but it prompted dozens of staff members to stop what they were doing and make their way to the long exit hallway. Smiling and chatting, they began lining up on the walls.

Over in the intensive care ward, a 14-year-old Iraqi boy was gingerly settling into a wheelchair.

With a doctor rolling him along and his father by his side, Ahmad rounded the corner, turned down the hallway and broke into a grin. He raised his hand and waved at all of the medical professionals who were waiting -- for him.

The staff members began to applaud as he passed, and they continued until he made it to the exit double-doors.

"He shouldn't have survived," said Maj. (Dr.) Chris Wilhelm, a pediatrician in the AFTH intensive care unit.

About a month ago, Ahmad was playing in a field with three friends when a mortar hit the ground next to them and exploded. The other three children died, and Ahmad was left with numerous life-threatening trauma wounds.

"His injuries included a fracture to the right arm, a hole in his right hand, (and) multiple penetrating wounds, to include shrapnel that entered through his back, went through his liver and caused quite a bit of blood loss into his abdominal cavity," Major Wilhelm said. "He presented to the emergency room basically lifeless."

Immediately, the ER staff took blood samples from Ahmad. The Ph test, which measures the efficiency of metabolism, came back almost instantly at a stunningly low 6.52.

After the staff attempted to stabilize him, it became clear that Ahmad needed immediate surgery if he was going to live.

When Col. (Dr.) Michael Miller, an orthopedic surgeon at the AFTH, first saw Ahmad and the Ph test results, he thought the boy was already gone. He said there's a certain range on the Ph scale -- starting at above 7.0 -- that tells doctors that a patient has a chance at surviving a trauma.

"A Ph of 6.52 is outside that range," Colonel Miller said. "It's that simple."

But, somehow, Ahmad's heart was beating and his lungs were working, so the colonel knew there was hope.

Including Doctor Miller, six surgeons -- two on his left arm, two on his right leg, two on his abdomen -- plus three anesthesiologists simultaneously worked on the damaged boy in the operating room for several hours. The next day, they spent another eight-plus hours operating.

"He went back to the operating room about every two days," said Doctor Wilhelm. "Each time he was in there, he was in there for (at least) five hours."

The boy stayed sedated, breathing through a ventilator, for two weeks. He was slowly healing, but he was also



JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq -- Medical personnel applaud as Ahmad, a 14-year-old Iraqi victim of a mortar explosion, leaves the Air Force Theater Hospital here Sept. 17, 2009. Ahmad spent more than a month at the AFTH recovering from his injuries. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Heather Norris)

slowly oozing blood from the dozens of shrapnel wounds he sustained all over his body. That, combined with the amount of blood he lost before arriving at the hospital, meant the staff had to continue supplying him with blood.

"One of the remarkable things about this is that he received so many blood products that it started to put a strain on our blood supply," Doctor Wilhelm said. "The blood bank quickly saw that this was happening, and they put out a base-wide e-mail (saying) that we had a pediatric trauma here and that we needed B-positive blood. Immediately, people showed up at the hospital willing to donate, and they continued to do so two days afterward."

After a total of 15 surgeries, 40-plus units of donated blood products, and a long stay in the ICU, Ahmad was transferred to the intermediate care ward.

"The degree of injuries he sustained was a little overwhelming," said Maj. Ivette Sterling, ICW clinical nurse. Undaunted, she and other ICW personnel took Ahmad in and started the long process of restoring nutrition through normal eating, healing wounds with frequent cleanings and redressings, and rebuilding muscle with basic exercises.

It was at the ICW that spirits began to steadily improve.

"I got to see him take his first steps," Major Sterling said. "That was a proud moment. Considering all of his injuries, it was amazing."

Ahmad kept progressing, and the day nobody could have predicted eventually came. He was leaving the hospital, and he wasn't hiding his excitement.

"I'm very, very happy because I keep seeing everybody smiling at me," the teenager said.

For some of the hospital staff, it wasn't quite as simple.

"It was bittersweet," said Major Sterling. "You see him getting so much better, he got to know all the staff. It was sad to see him leave, but we were happy he was going home. It was kind of like one of your own leaving the nest."

Even for those at the AFTH who didn't spend as much time with Ahmad, his recovery is something they will never forget.

"When you can really affect someone's life like that, it gets to you," said Colonel Miller. "You clearly know that if this institution weren't here, he would have died."

And Ahmad didn't just survive -- aside from some sensation loss in his fingers, he's expected to make a near-complete recovery after physical therapy. To Doctor Wilhelm, one of the many who cheered the boy as he left the building, the whole experience was inspiring.

"Taking care of (Ahmad) will be a story I'll tell to many other physicians, and they won't believe it," said Major Wilhelm. "A child presenting with a 6.52? They won't believe that, but that's fine. The rest of us who were here -- we know that was true. It'll be one of those (cases) that influences me to always keep pressing on and to not give up."

Ahmad didn't give up, either, and he clearly left the hospital with his priorities intact: What was the first thing he planned to do when he got home? "I want to hug my mom," he said.