

CMA AWARD

Transplant surgeon dedicates last decade of career to the Canadian military



Dr. Vivian McAlister was living a “comfortable” life back in 2006. He was an established transplant surgeon at the London Health Sciences Centre and professor of surgery at the University of Western Ontario.

Yet a presentation by one of his former medical students, back from a recent tour in Afghanistan, made him question it all.

“This type of trauma work was hard, and in a way, Canada was being unfair asking young graduates to go overseas when there are plenty of old guys like me who have both the experience and the resilience.”

Realizing the value of his skills in a war zone, Dr. McAlister felt compelled to step up, and to the surprise

of many colleagues, he volunteered as a civilian surgeon for the Afghan mission in Kandahar. Moved by the soldiers he treated and inspired by his surgical team, he decided to go one step further.

At age 52, he started basic training — and joined the Canadian Forces Health Services (CFHS) as a combat surgeon.

Over the course of a decade, while maintaining his surgical and teaching duties in Canada, Dr. McAlister completed five missions in Afghanistan, one in Iraq and another in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.

In Afghanistan, in the midst of facing the physical and mental demands of surgery, Dr. McAlister was instrumental in developing

trauma protocols to make patient care as accurate and fast as possible. This work was critical because of the need to address the catastrophic injuries caused by anti-personnel improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The protocols included strategies to reduce hemorrhage and preserve limbs and tissue.

“When I started, if that type of injury occurred to a civilian in Canada, they would not survive. Now we are able to regularly bring these patients home from Afghanistan — but their road to recovery is life-long.”

Adding to his impressive list of 160 publications, Dr. McAlister published papers on trauma resuscitation and injury patterns from IEDs in international medical journals. He also applied his research to the management of civilian trauma, organizing a day-long course on mass casualty training for Canadian general surgeons.

As he completes his final year with the CFHS, Dr. McAlister believes passionately that all surgeons should consider the opportunity to serve their country.

“It changes the morale of our fighting men and women to know we’re going to be there and that we have a successful record of bringing them home in the best condition possible.”

Dr. Vivian McAlister is the recipient of the John McCrae Memorial Medal. It is presented to current or former clinical health services personnel of the Canadian Armed Forces for exemplary service.