

Barbara Comess, MD, FCAP

Leading Eisenhower's Pathology Department in Identifying Cancer

By: J. Tracy Hermann



Barbara Comess, MD, FCAP, with dogs Mikro and Mini

What comes to mind when thinking of pathology? For some, something altogether mysterious or elusive, like television's Quincy or Crossing Jordan. But for Eisenhower Medical Center's Barbara Comess, MD, FCAP, pathology is so much more than just the study of disease – it's an "incredibly broad and constantly growing field that is at once rewarding, fascinating and intellectually stimulating."

As chair of Eisenhower Medical Center's Pathology Department, Dr. Comess is poised at the forefront of this dynamic discipline, a field that she chose to pursue over a myriad of other medical disciplines, among them – pediatrics.

"I came so close to going into pediatrics," Dr. Comess, a graduate of the University of Arizona College of Medicine, says with a grin. "But part of what I liked about pediatrics was the scope of disease and the opportunity to positively impact the child's future. In pathology, I research multiple disease entities and render diagnoses, but still interact with patients and families of all ages. It really is the best of all worlds."

It's a world that is often a stark and sobering one, given that cancer plays a significant role.

"We diagnose a diverse range of cancers here at Eisenhower," Dr. Comess asserts, wearing the intense gaze of an astute scientist. "The high volume and diversity of cases lets us not only use the incredible resources and cuttingedge technologies available at this institution, but also participate in research studies implemented at leading academic centers."

Those resources include the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center, one of three Centers of Excellence found on the Eisenhower campus. Thanks in part to Dr. Comess and her team of pathologists, the Center and its Arnold Palmer Prostate Center and Eisenhower Schnitzer/Novack Breast Center offer some of the best care of its kind, not only in this region, but beyond, lending hope and promise to the patients and their families.

"Among the diagnostic techniques we have available is our state-of-the-art cytology (study of cells) department that allows us to perform minimallyinvasive diagnostic techniques," Dr. Comess explains. "With the support of radiology, we can look at individual cells, make a rapid diagnosis, and help guide therapy often without any surgical intervention."

Amazing yes – impossible no, but all standard fare for a woman who counts among her hobbies scuba diving and offering her time and talents to third world countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

In 1994, Dr. Comess spent six weeks studying the pathophysiology of malaria in Malawi, an extremely poor country in central Africa. There she encountered not only malaria, but also a host of diseases that have been obliterated from the Western world for countless years.

"This amazing experience let me see life and medicine from a completely different perspective," Dr. Comess recalls. "You really gain insight on how challenging mere survival can be in the outside world."

Dr. Comess is also an avid environmentalist and staunch animal rights advocate. The proud owner of two miniature dachshunds, Mikro and Mini, she supports a variety of local, national and international social and environmental causes.

But it's her work at Eisenhower that most impassions this multi-faceted health care professional. "I have a great opportunity here," Dr. Comess says of her recent (January 2005) appointment as Chair of the Department of Pathology. "I'm enthusiastic about continuing the good work that's been accomplished here at Eisenhower and further building this department into something the hospital and community will continue to be proud of."