

# Cooperative Medical Engagement Treats Hundreds of Women, Children

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**Children peer over a concrete wall during a Cooperative Medical Engagement event in as-Saqlawiyah, Iraq, Feb. 29. The event took place at the village schoolhouse and provided free medical care for more than 200 civilians in the community. Photo by Cpl. Benjamin Eberle, I Marine Logistic Group Public Affairs.**

**SAQLAWIYAH** — “Shukran” is the Arabic word for “thank you,” and service members heard it often during a civil affairs event here, Feb. 29.

Iraqi personnel – along with Marines, Sailors and Soldiers based at Camp Taqaddum and neighboring Habbaniyah – participated in a Cooperative Medical Engagement (CME) event at a village schoolhouse, providing free medical care to more than 200 Iraqi civilians.

An 18-year-old mother said the medical supplies were greatly needed, but being able to accept them without fearing retaliation is the most significant achievement of Iraqi and Coalition forces.

“We like the Iraqi Police being around,” she said, through an interpreter. “Before, the insurgents wouldn’t even let us take water from the (nearby) river.”

The CME is part of Iraqi Women’s Engagement (IWE), a State Department outreach program providing support to Iraq’s women while respecting local customs.

Male-female interaction in public is discouraged, even in medical environments, so female medical personnel worked with female interpreters to assist the Iraqi women. Men were seen in a separate room on the opposite end of the school.

Petty Officer 1st Class Jennifer Knuth, a 34-year-old corpsman from Athens, Ga., was the chief medical provider for women. Her job was to ensure Iraqi women and their children received quality medical attention without being “contained by their culture.”

“We usually see a pretty good turnout of women,” said Knuth, a corpsman with Marine Wing Support Squadron 272, 2nd Marine Air Wing. She normally treats about 100 during each CME. “It’s nice that they’re able to get female care for female issues.”

Regardless of culture, sharing personal medical information with anyone can be difficult. Facilitating face-to-face dialogue between women is a practical solution that helps ease that apprehension, said Maj. Margaret M. Weitzel, CampTaqaddum’s IWE coordinator.

“(Male Marines) can be intimidating,” Weitzel said.

So are female Marines, when they need to be. Armed with loaded service rifles, the women had the weighty task of keeping the area safe. They worked alongside their male counterparts, providing security during the medical engagement and searching Iraqi women for contraband.

“I take it very seriously,” said Cpl. Jessica A. Cox, a 24-year-old from Waynesville, Mo. She’s deployed to CampTaqaddum as an electrician with MWSS-272 and provided security for the CME event. “There’ve been kids strapped with bombs, and they’ve also had females come in with bombs on them, so it’s very important to check everyone thoroughly.”

Gunnery Sgt. Tammy A. Belleville, company gunnery sergeant for Headquarters and Service Company, 1st Marine Logistics Group, led a small team of female Marines responsible for searching women and children before they entered the compound.

She agreed the job was important and said the experience helped her relate more to the civilians inside the schoolhouse she was working to protect.

“You see the Iraqi women interacting with their children, and we’re so much the same,” said Belleville, whose husband and 10-year-old son live in Oceanside, Calif.

“The maternal instinct is there, no matter what language you speak or what geographic location you come from,” she said. “More and more, I see that we’re more alike than we are different.”

On average, the IWE program connects Camp Taqaddum personnel with the Iraqi public once a week.

(Story by Cpl. Benjamin Eberle, I Marine Logistic Group Public Affairs)