

Dr. Mitchell J. Besser
Founder/Medical Director, mothers2mothers



A graduate of Harvard Medical School, Dr. Besser's career in obstetrics and gynecology has been one of astounding accomplishment and diversity. Combining his passions for travel, international health, and social responsibility, he began his early career with field and research experience in areas as culturally disparate as Zululand, Swaziland and South Africa to Heidelberg, Oxford, and a Navajo Indian Hospital in Fort Defiance, Arizona.

Rapidly becoming known not only as a leader in the field of international health, but as a visionary eager to tackle the challenges of the developing world, Dr. Besser became a consultant in Perinatal Medicine and Family Planning for the Federated States of Micronesia, where he developed protocols that were ultimately adopted nationally for use by all prenatal clinics. This success was part of a three year appointment as the first OB/GYN to work in Truk State, initiating that state's family planning programs and comprehensive maternal health care system.

Returning to the U.S., Dr. Besser began inspiring new, young doctors as an instructor at Harvard Medical School and at the prestigious Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, where he was also a member of the Infant Mortality Task Force and a consultant for the Dept. of Corrections and the Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health.

Never one to stay home-bound for long, in 1993 he once again left the States, this time bound for Hanoi, Vietnam as a volunteer for the American Voluntary Medical Team and as a consultant to Project Hope in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

By now the father of two young boys, Dr. Besser settled down in San Diego, California, from 1991-2000. Joining the faculties of both San Diego State University's Graduate School of Public Health and UCSD's Dept of Reproductive Medicine, he assumed the role of Medical Director of The Birth Place, an out-of-hospital birth center designed to provide safe and cost-effective care for low-income women; and OBGYN Consultants and Athena Women's Health, a collaborative practice of midwives and physicians providing obstetric, gynecological and pediatric services to low-income families. Employing midwives and a physician collaborative model, he was able to crystallize his commitment to aiding indigent young mothers in accessing medical attention that might otherwise be unavailable. During this busy and productive time, he also served as the Director of Obstetrics Maternal and Child HIV Clinic at UCSD's Medical Center. Director of OB/GYN Consultants and Athena Women's Health, a collaborative and the Medical practice of midwives and physicians providing obstetric, gynecological and pediatric services to low-income families. Finally, he served as the first OB/GYN and Director of Women's Services at North County Health Service, forming collaborative relationships with nurse practitioners. These San Diego experiences were the foundations upon which mothers2mothers would later be built.

In January of 2000, Dr. Besser relocated his family to Cape Town, South Africa, a country which had first captivated him as a high school exchange student in 1971. There, he joined the staff of the University of Cape Town's Department of Obstetrics, assisting with the development of initiatives to reduce mother to child transmission of HIV and provide care to HIV-infected women. He established antenatal care programs at two district hospitals and the tertiary care hospital, and formed committees to coordinate hospital services for HIV-infected pregnant women and their infants.

During his work with HIV positive pregnant patients, Dr. Besser came to recognize the need for a psychosocial support program that would provide hope and encouragement to the many women who were struggling to cope with the devastation of an HIV diagnosis. Hoping to fill this void, he founded **mothers2mothers** in September of 2001. Today, five years later, he has guided the program into one of the most successful prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) associated programs in the world. **mothers2mothers** now manages 72 sites in 4 provinces in South Africa as well as in Ethiopia and Botswana and is in the midst of expansion to Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, and Lesotho,. In the words of Dr. Besser, "There has never been a dream that was impossible." Thanks to his selfless work and dedication, thousands of HIV positive women are realizing their dreams... to stay alive to raise healthy babies.