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Doctor talks to UM students about work in Third World countries

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As a world-renowned physician, Dr. Paul Farmer has brought his approach to public health to some of the most gut-wrenching places in the world.

On Tuesday, he brought that approach -- and the lessons it offers -- to the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

"We cannot move forward in American healthcare without social medicine," said Farmer, who touts not just treating illnesses but understanding and attacking social and economic conditions in order to make treatment most effective.

In Haiti, where Farmer has worked for the past 25 years, that means not just providing drugs to HIV-infected patients but also ensuring they have clean drinking water and zinc sheeting for their homes and helping to strengthen the public health system by rebuilding hospitals and training local doctors.

Tuesday night, Farmer was honored during a dinner at the Lois Pope LIFE Center, 1095 NW 14th Ter., Miami, with the 2009 Lois Pope LIFE International Achievement Award. The award recognizes his community-based treatment strategies for AIDS and tuberculosis in Haiti, Peru, Rwanda, Malawi and other impoverished nations.

"It's kind of funny to get a lifetime achievement award when you are 49," the Harvard Medical School anthropologist and infectious-disease specialist told The Miami Herald in between rounds with UM students, who packed lecture halls to hear him speak.

Throughout the talks Farmer credited Haiti and the Haitian people for his training, and told students that lessons from the Third World can be applied in the United States, where many go without health insurance and effective healthcare.

"I thought it was very entertaining, and I do like how he is trying to emphasize helping people no matter what their economic status," said Rosanne Henry, 22, a first-year medical student.

"The hope is that we graduate students who understand the basics of what social medicine and healthcare in the sense that Paul Farmer is bringing it about," said Dr. Bernard Fogel, dean emeritus of the medical school.

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