

BLUE SKY FACULTY FOLIO

INSPIRED





Healing Connection

Patient care and innovation span from the civilian to the military realm

When Vikhyat “Vik” Bebarta, MD, was in his early teens, his father Prafulla struggled with a mysterious ailment that eroded his thinking and evaded a definitive diagnosis. Bebarta, his mother and brother would frequently make the hour-long journey from Denmark, South Carolina, to the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta to visit him.

Amid a litany of tests that would ultimately prove inconclusive, Bebarta remembers a young attending physician, Paul Fischer, MD, entering the room and saying a few simple words that would calm the anxious family: “We’ll take care of you.”

“I learned from Fischer what a doctor can do,” Bebarta recalls. “It’s not about how many tests or x-rays you order or how many consults you give.”

“IT’S ABOUT HOW YOU MAKE A FAMILY FEEL. HE HELPED ME UNDERSTAND HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO TALK TO THE FAMILY AND PATIENTS. HE SAW THE IMPACT MY DAD’S ILLNESS HAD ON OUR FAMILY FROM THE RURAL SOUTH WITH NO COMMUNITY TO LEAN ON.”

Bebarta’s parents immigrated to the U.S. from India. His father held a PhD in demography and his mother held two PhDs, spending her career as a professor and higher education administrator.

"My parents encouraged me to go into education," he says. "I grew up in an environment of inquiry, publications, grants and teaching."

Still, the self-described "skinny brown kid with a long funny name and a southern accent" needed to find places to fit in Denmark, a sleepy hamlet of about 4,000 people.

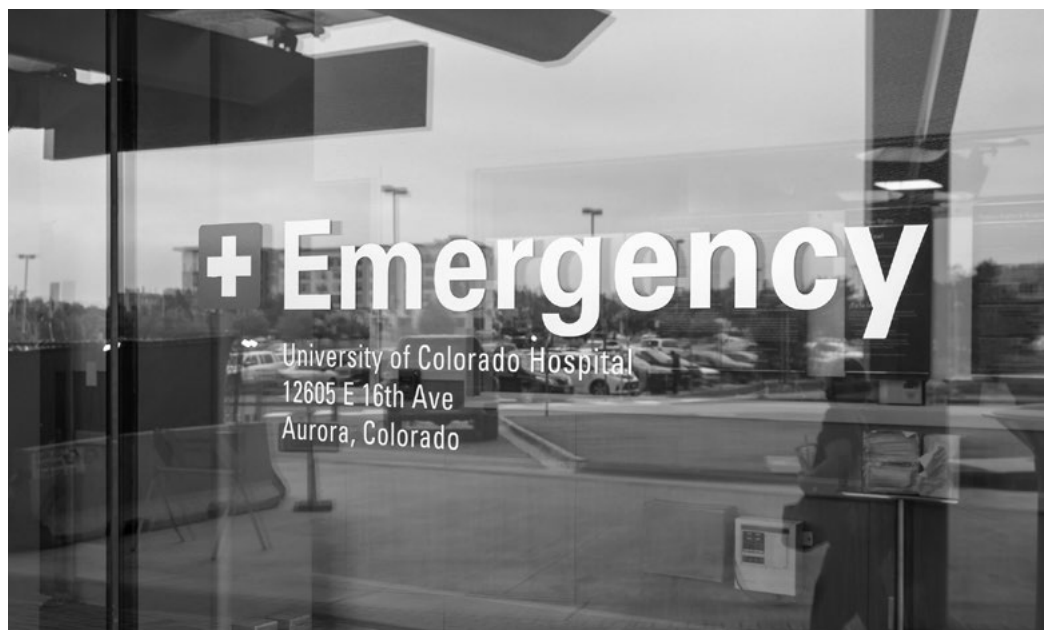
He grew up participating in Cub and Boy Scouts, led by a mustachioed, motorcycle-riding machinist and Army veteran named Gus Eubanks. A history buff and outdoorsman with an artistic flair, Eubanks was an "inspiration and someone to look up to in that small town," Bebarta remembers, who hiked and camped with Eubanks and his three sons over the years. They became a second family.

A DIFFERENT PATH

When the new South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics opened a few hours away from Bebarta's hometown, a teacher encouraged him to apply but he initially hesitated.

"I got a pickup truck. I'm playing football. I'm going to prom. I don't want to go with the nerds," he recalls thinking at the time until his mother intervened. "She told me, 'Put yourself on a different path.' So, I decided to go. It turned out to be the biggest opportunity of a lifetime."

Bebarta was one of 64 students in the school's inaugural class of 1988. He took challenging classes taught by instructors recruited from nearby colleges. Crediting Eubanks as an influence, Bebarta chose to enroll in the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs after graduating high school in 1990. From there, he went on to earn a medical degree from George Washington University School of Medicine. Attracted to the fast pace of emergency medicine



and trauma care, Bebarta later served as chief resident at Denver Health Medical Center, the Colorado capital city's only Level I trauma center at the time.

"I LIKED THE DIRECT IMPACT, THAT FROM THE MOMENT I TOOK CARE OF A PATIENT THAT I WOULD BE CHANGING THEIR LIFE," BEBARTA EXPLAINS.

Bebarta's interest in emergency medicine included a passion for toxicology. He felt expertise in chemical exposures and threats would be important for future of the Air Force. A 2001 meeting with the chief of Air Force Emergency Medicine resulted in Bebarta completing a two-year toxicology fellowship at the Rocky Mountain Poison Control and Drug Center, led by Richard Dart, MD, Professor of Emergency Medicine and Medical Toxicology and Pharmacology at the CU School of Medicine. Dart had built a center that specialized

in science and research and served as a valuable consultant to the medical community.

"I saw what a big enterprise looked like on the scientific side," Bebarta says. "It was eye-opening to me."

Dart's work revealed to Bebarta how to solve problems by bringing together academic, industry and federal research in common cause. That concept helped him to later build and direct several Air Force research programs.

MISSION FOCUS

The different building blocks of Bebarta's medical education prepared him for the chaos of treating soldiers injured on the battlefield. He served 14 years of active duty, including four overseas tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, Jordan, and Syria.

In 2005, Bebarta began serving as Chief of Emergency Medicine at Joint Base Balad's Air Force Theater Hospital, then the largest U.S. hospital in Iraq. Soldiers, many of them just 18 or 19 years old, were flown by helicopter to Trauma Bay II from battles in places like Fallujah

and Ramadi maimed by shrapnel, burned by improvised explosive devices, and peppered with bullets.

“Trauma Bay II was the genesis of innovation in casualty care and the bedrock for applications in clinical practice,” Bebarta says.

The ongoing challenge was to act with urgency to save lives and decrease suffering. Through it all, Bebarta says he hewed to the example set by Fischer.

“They would come in with lost limbs and I would later be talking to their mother back in Arkansas or Texas about their child. In their direst moments, you’re there to save them,” Bebarta says. “You’re also there to take care of them, to talk to and console their families. People talk about med school being built around learning science, studying, and building knowledge. To me, it was always more about making human contact.”

Bebarta’s efforts to save lives with improved techniques in resuscitation, prehospital care, treatment for traumatic injuries and other work has earned him numerous honors, including the 2022 Air Force Hero of Military Medicine Award for the Advancement of Military Medicine. Additionally, he is a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and is Senior Leader for the Office of the Chief Scientist, 59th Medical Wing, Joint Base San Antonio, Texas.

“Military service channeled my career, my future, and my investment in being part of work with similar, like-minded people who want to do the same thing. It allowed me to see a side of myself that I’d never seen before – as a leader and decision maker in war. It also launched my research career and desire to find real answers to problems that no one else has. It was so empowering,” he says.



PROBLEM SOLVER

His commitment to patient care and innovation bridges the civilian and military worlds. Some may consider the civilian and military realms separate, but much of the hard-earned advances in emergency and trauma care earned in the crucible of battle have translated to civilian lives saved, Bebarta points out.

He joined the University of Colorado School of Medicine as a tenured Professor and Vice Chair of Strategy and Growth for the Department of Emergency Medicine. With the encouragement of Department of Emergency Medicine Chair Richard Zane, MD, Bebarta founded and directs the CU Center for Combat and Battlefield (COMBAT) Research. COMBAT brings the talent and expertise of the academic world to help the military solve clinical problems.

“WE’RE ALIGNING THE BRIGHTEST FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO WITH THE BEST FROM THE MILITARY AS A TEAM TO SOLVE THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE’S TOUGHEST CLINICAL CHALLENGES,” BEBARTA SAYS. “WE LOOK FOR SOLUTIONS THAT CAN BE IMPLEMENTED IN A RUCKSACK, ON A TRUCK, OR PUT ON A SHELF IN A COUPLE OF YEARS.” ■