When a modern American city has the same incidence of premature babies as a village in a Third World nation, something is amiss. But that is exactly what is happening in southeastern Michigan, according to Sonia Hassan, M.D., who is director of the Center for Advanced Obstetrical Care and Research. The center, which is housed at Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center, partners with the Perinatology Research Branch (PRB) of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

“Here in Detroit, the rate of preterm births is 18 percent, which is similar to the country of Malawi in Africa, so it’s very high and really unfortunate. We have to ask ourselves how that can occur here in the United States,” she said. Preterm birth is the leading cause of infant mortality and leads to chronic health problems such as respiratory distress syndrome, learning disabilities and cerebral palsy. The Center, however, is working to chip away at those numbers through a wide-ranging prenatal program that gives women personalized care throughout their pregnancies. The approach is working.

As an example, Hassan pointed to one of the Center’s patients. This woman had already gone through the heartbreak of giving birth at 25 weeks and losing her baby. “She was obviously very nervous when she came to us in the middle of her next pregnancy,” Hassan recalled. “At the Center, she received the social support she needed as well as medical intervention that we know works, and I’m happy to say that she went on to deliver a healthy, full-term baby. It was a completely different pregnancy for her.”

She remarked, “It’s very satisfying to be a part of stories like that. It makes everything we do worthwhile.”
Patients who come to the Center receive a full scope of services, including state-of-the-art medical care, explained Hassan, who is also associate dean for maternal, perinatal and child health, and a professor of obstetrics and gynecology in the WSU School of Medicine. One aspect of that care is the use of progesterone gel, a preventative tactic that stemmed from a comprehensive study that Hassan and a team of researchers conducted as part of the PRB at the Detroit Medical Center and Wayne State University. The study showed that the gel reduces premature births — by a remarkable 45 percent — in women who are at risk for preterm delivery.

Hassan readily acknowledged that the Center has an unusually high level of patient surveillance. “The women like that extra attention. They know they are receiving the highest level of care they can get,” she remarked.

Patients also appreciate that they can see all of the members of their healthcare team at one time, so they don’t have to make multiple trips to different caregivers. Hassan explained, “We partner with physicians from Wayne State and the Detroit Medical Center, as well as midwives and other providers so patients can see them all, and that means seeing the same doctor, the same midwife, and the same medical assistant from one visit to the next.”

Another service in the Center’s prenatal-care offerings is a series of ultrasounds to track fetal development. Ultrasound imaging is helpful in identifying the potential for preterm birth as well as other obstetrical complications, which are also unusually prevalent among women in Detroit, Hassan said.

Women initially visit the Center as early as six weeks into their pregnancy, continue to visit every four weeks until their 24th week, and then begin biweekly office visits. At each office visit, the woman receives an ultrasound. Insurance typically doesn’t pay for this increased number of ultrasounds, but the patients aren’t left with the tab, she said. Instead, the center simply doesn’t charge the patients for them.

Besides receiving top-of-the-line care, patients also contribute to a scientific study in which researchers track the impact of the Center’s overall approach on preterm births and other complications,” Hassan said. “People often think that patients are afraid to sign up for research projects, but we have people calling up and asking if they can be a part of this study. I think that’s because the community is aware of what we’re doing and want to be a part of it.”

In May 2014, the Center extended its drive toward successful pregnancies and healthy newborns with the launch of the free ‘Make Your Date’ program, which encourages pregnant women to seek prenatal care, helps them find a healthcare provider if necessary, and assists with any insurance issues. Although it is less than three years old, Make Your Date already has had 4,500 people take part.

Of course, the big question with the center’s multifaceted services and the Make Your Date program is whether they are having an effect, Hassan said. “We think they are. In fact, we’ve looked preliminarily at our outcomes at the center and we’re seeing a decrease in that 18 percent preterm-birth rate.”