

## DOCTOR'S DAY

# A Salute to Physicians' Good Works

**A**s a working orthopedist and president of the Richmond Academy of Medicine, I hear a lot about the frustrations of medical practice today: Byzantine insurance bu-



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reaucrancies, ever-climbing patient volumes, stagnant government and insurance reimbursements, the constant threat of malpractice lawsuits.

But I've also got a panoramic perspective on the everyday triumphs of practicing medicine — the therapeutic relationships forged with patients and the satisfaction that comes from relieving suffering and improving lives.

These are the aspects of the medical profession I'd like to focus on today, as we commemorate national Doctor's Day and salute the good works of the nation's 900,000 physicians. Doctor's Day was first observed in 1933 in Barrow County, Ga., to memorialize the first use of ether anesthetic in surgery on March 30, 1842. Georgia physician Crawford Long revolutionized medicine and prevented untold agony with his discovery 166 years ago. That historic day is now nationally dedicated to recognizing doctors' commitment to the healing arts.

AN INFORMAL sampling of opinions from Richmond-area health professionals reveals that service to others — the heart of the Hippocratic Oath — is the trait most admired and most abundant in our medical community.

Sally Graham, executive director of the Goochland Free Clinic, notes that all the physicians working at her clinic are volunteers. "They've already got an incredibly busy day that would just knock most people flat," she says. "Then they come out here and see patients for two to three hours. They're just phenomenal. We wouldn't be able to do what we do without them."

Dr. Howard F. Faunce III, president of Radiology Associates of Richmond, says he's always respected the fact that "bottom line, most all of my colleagues got into this profession because they wanted to do something good for people."

John J. Baumann, executive director of the Fan Free Clinic, which has served Richmond's poor for 38 years, says the service to others is steadfast. "In spite of all the difficulties of modern-day medical practice, and even in spite of the increasing growth at free clinics, we haven't ever been in a position that we did not have enough volunteer doctors to do what we need. There's a real generosity there."

THAT GENEROSITY has been demonstrated in gratifying numbers over the past year, as more than 550 physicians in the greater Richmond area have signed on to a new referral program designed to provide free specialty care to the region's low-income uninsured. Access Now, officially launched in January by the Richmond Academy of Medicine and REACH (Richmond Enhancing Access to Community Healthcare), takes over when the medical needs of clinic patients exceed the expertise of clinics' primary care doctors. The Access Now network links these patients to specialists who perform surgery without charge, to hospitals that donate free care, to pathologists and radiologists who pick up the tab for medical tests and lab expenses, and to pharmacies that donate free medicine.

In its first 10 weeks, the program has referred about 150 patients to area specialists. Each referral usually results in three appointments — an initial consult, the needed procedure or surgery, and a follow-up exam. Early projections indicate that in its first year, Access Now will refer between 1,000 and 1,200 patients to community volunteer specialists.

Based upon information obtained on 57 patients referred, the value of donated services from physicians could easily top \$500,000 or more in 2008. When free care from hospitals and other constituencies is factored in, Access Now will result in millions of dollars of charity care annually for the region's neediest uninsured patients.

Good works should not go unacknowledged. I'd like to personally say thank you to my colleagues for the sacrifices they routinely make: the long hours, the middle-of-the-night emergencies, the many weekends on call, and the stress on family life from medicine's unpredictable demands. Today we celebrate the important role of doctors in our lives and acknowledge their contributions. They honor the profession with their skill and dedication. Today we honor them.

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