



The staff of Dr. Gerald VanWieren's independent medical practice in Grant includes (left to right) physician assistant Lisa Gee, family nurse practitioner Suzanne VanWieren, Gerald

VanWieren and geriatric nurse practitioner Pat Koning. The practice also includes medical assistants Gayle Simington and Ginger Holbrook.

Why I still practice medicine

By Gerald Van Wieren MD

During my first years of internal medicine practice, a frequent question asked by new patients was: "Are you old enough to be a doctor?" After more than 35 years in a rural Michigan community, they are now asking when I plan retirement. Where did the years go? When was the sweet spot? I used to tell them that I would quit at age 70, but I am starting to question that plan.

People from 5.5 generations have sought my care, counting an expectant mother of the fifth generation. The sweet spot is now, and it consists of a thousand relationships. When patients see me, we do the things that we always did: solve clinical problems, manage chronic disease, and maximize their quality of life "until death do us part."

What has entered the exam room in recent years is very special. Patients are nostalgic about decades of care, and they frequently express gratitude. We reminisce about a departed spouse whom I also cared for. We discuss their life goals when strength and options are waning. I get to know family members who are taking a greater role in assisting them with care and decisions.

At first I deflected the retirement question by saying that I will keep practicing until I get it right. That doesn't stand the test of reality, because I will never get it right. I am an imperfect doctor taking care of imperfect people. The fear of failing those who trust me keeps me studying and questioning. I enjoy lifelong learning, especially about medical subjects.

In 1972, while stationed in Greece with the Air Force, I felt God calling me into medicine. My Aunt Mary Jo always said that I would be a good doctor, but there were no medical role models in my family.

To combine a love for science with a growing

compassion for people drew me to follow the Great Physician. A great part of Jesus' ministry was healing. No longer did I feel that work was a burden so that I could do pleasurable things with my earnings. I could find joy in a rigorous career.

Indeed, it has been challenging. Philippians 4:13 has been a theme. "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." The wonder of diagnosing and treating problems that afflict body, soul and spirit has kept me from boredom. The challenge has been to set limits on a career that tends to be all-consuming. I enjoy running cross-country more than sprinting, and I have kept a pace that could be sustained.

One drawback to solo practice is the lack of colleagues to discuss difficult cases with. Partnering with my wife Suzanne has helped. She did her family nurse practitioner program at MSU while I did internal medicine residency. I have accepted a position as Medical Director of a nearby PACE program. This Program for All-around Care of the Elderly gives me a chance to interact with a multidisciplinary team possessing skills and perspectives that supplement mine.

A team has been forming in our own office. We have a physician's assistant (Lisa Gee) and a geriatric nurse practitioner (Patricia Koning) to provide extra appointments and vacation coverage. They have good minds for internal medicine, and I appreciate their input on difficult cases. In fact, we recently began sharing Lisa with Family Health Care, allowing her to serve patients with both teams. This is an example of

cooperation between offices for the betterment of the community.

Instead of closing our practice abruptly, we are focusing on building a team that can allow us more freedom to visit our

children and grandchildren and to vacation together.

I treasure our two medical assistants (Gayle Simington and Ginger Holbrook), who are both

friends and employees. They are more valuable to the practice with each passing year. The practice exists to benefit patients, owners, employees, and community. It should continue.

Factors outside of my control could alter plans to keep working. The one constant in healthcare is change. Our income depends on the structure set by insurance plans and government. Expensive computer systems have become indispensable for record keeping, billing and communication. We trust that God is sovereign over all of that, as well as our own health.

We never retire from a responsibility to serve our fellow man. I am grateful for scholarships and mentors who prepared me to practice medicine. I want to continue to be a good steward of a scarce resource.

Medical doctor is not just what I do; it is a big part of who I am.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Gerald VanWieren, an internal medicine specialist, heads the only independent medical practice in Newaygo County. He has worked in Grant since 1982, and the practice is continuing to accept a limited number of new patients. He will celebrate his 70th birthday in May.

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