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News

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*****Physician/educator gives up job--
and gets back to work.

DALLAS--Even after 26 years Dr. Jack Pritchard, Gillette Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, is not one to sit recounting his successes. It's not that the physician/educator doesn't have them--in fact, his record of accomplishments in the area of care for mothers and their newborn is unparalleled. The problem is getting the man to sit still at all.

Pacing the halls of Parkland Memorial Hospital, where he recently retired from duties as head of OB services, Pritchard talks about the early days in Dallas when "family planning" was a dirty word. At that time, the hospital, a county entity staffed by state University of Texas system physicians, would not provide contraceptive services for patients. The perinatal death rate (a term that includes just before and just after birth) at Parkland was one in 25. In addition, there was no intensive care unit, no special facilities for high-risk mothers, and conditions were in general "second-rate" for health care for new mothers and their babies.

Things weren't so good in the OB/Gyn department at the school, either, said Pritchard, who had come from Western Reserve University to head up the department. "At the time I came to Southwestern (the medical school component of today's health science center), there were 11 residents, one unused grant, one secretary and one faculty member who immediately announced that he was leaving."

Today OB/Gyn has 11 new residents per year, 50 on its faculty and an on-going research program that is the envy of outstanding medical institutions around the country. Juanita Epperson, that secretary, now administrative services officer, is still here, and things have changed for the patient who does not have a private physician in Dallas. Not only has the perinatal death rate dropped to 1 in 5,000, but the overall mother-child mortality rate is less than two percent, better than the national average. Facilities, including high-risk pregnancy and newborn intensive-care units, are the pride of the hospital.

In addition, family planning services are available through the hospital as well as through a series of well-run clinics located in neighborhoods where there is a great need for all areas of obstetrical care. Pritchard points with particular pride to the fact that Southwestern's family planning program is the major way the woman without a personal physician is screened for early cancer detection, a procedure that saves many lives a year, as well as identifying sickle cell patients and those at risk of transmitting the disease to their children. In addition, these medical services are an important force in combating the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the community.

"But I guess I'm proudest of the people with whom I've worked," said Pritchard, "the large number of extremely talented people who have been willing to give a career in academic OB/Gyn a fling."

Many of the residents training under Pritchard in Parkland have also become educators in their area and gone on to outstanding careers in their field.

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In addition, a large percentage of the doctors in this discipline in Dallas trained under Pritchard. Last year more than half of the residents training in the UT program stayed in Dallas or rural North Texas areas to practice their specialty, a fact that reflects national statistics showing that physicians are likely to stay in states where they receive their graduate training, rather than where they went to medical school.

The physician/educator commented that he believes the "passing of the baton" tradition followed by the department is one of the reasons for its overall strength.

Pritchard gave up the chairmanship in 1969 to devote more time to the training of residents in the hospital and "passed the baton" on to faculty member Paul MacDonald. MacDonald later "passed it on" to current department head Norman Gant so that he could devote more time to his research.

"I am extremely proud to have had a hand in the education and training of Paul MacDonald and Norman Gant who have become such outstanding educators and researchers in academic research in obstetrics and gynecology.

"In my own case, giving up the chairmanship of the department allowed me to have much more time to apply to what I hope was a lot more sophisticated level of obstetrical care at a time when a new subspecialty (maternal fetal medicine) was evolving," Pritchard said. "This was the greatest evolution in our field in the 70s and has given rise to a subspecialty board for certification." (Pritchard is a member of this board and chairman of the testing committee.)

July 1 Pritchard turned over the responsibility for OB/Gyn services at Parkland to Dr. Gary Cunningham, an associate professor in the department. But that doesn't mean he's ready to quit working. He'll be seeing many of the nearly 250-a-day patients in the hospital, working on yet another edition of "Williams' Obstetrics," considered by many the textbook in this field and working toward his goals of "more space, more speed" for Parkland patient services.

"But it's time for someone else to take over," he said. "Young people need the chance to grow, and too often they have to move to do it. Obstetrics here deserves the best, and Cunningham deserves the best."

Pritchard believes the department's residents, as well as its faculty, are among the top in the country because the best are attracted to a quality program like Southwestern's. He also feels that the field attracts doctors with certain outstanding characteristics.

"Over the years I've noticed that OB/Gyn attracts physicians who like to do overall care, and in our training program we assume the complete responsibility for the mother and the fetus, using other specialty areas for consultation. Also, the OB/Gyn resident likes to work in a happy environment, and this is one of the few areas in medicine where you go home with more than you started out with," he joked. "And there are just enough sudden and severe crises to appeal to the young physician."

Parkland honored the professor recently with a surprise luncheon on the occasion of his retirement as head of OB/Gyn services.

At that time Dr. Charles B. Mullins, Parkland's chief executive officer, spoke of Pritchard as a "pioneer in obstetrical care in Dallas County.

"Not only did he teach a high standard of care in obstetrics, he spread it out into the community and developed neighborhood clinics because he discovered that this was where this kind of care was sorely needed."

Mullins also credited Pritchard with integrating obstetrical care in Dallas. Several hospitals, including Parkland, he said, began allowing black physicians to practice obstetrics because of the physician's insistence.

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"And most important," the hospital head summed up, "he taught me obstetrics--and I delivered about 140 babies when I was in medical school. I learned to respect him then, and he's still one of the most successful teachers at the health science center."

In December ceremonies were held in conjunction with the regular holiday season meeting of department residents and former residents. Physicians who had trained under Pritchard flocked back from around the country to honor him with a Silver Anniversary celebration.

Mixed with funny remembrances were serious sentiments. Chairman Gant thanked Pritchard, an educator with the reputation of being a relentless taskmaster, for "25 years of your life--time you spent with us to make us understand what quality patient care really is." Dr. Peggy Whalley told Pritchard and the assembled group how proud she is to be the Jack A. Pritchard Professor at Southwestern. And faculty member Barry Schwarz, who trained under the honoree, added an apocryphal closing to the evening with a letter from his son, whom Pritchard had delivered:

Dear Dr. Pritchard:

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At times when it was happening and you were introducing me to this world and reality, there were times that I thought you were too cruel for such a young and delicate child. But for myself and on behalf of all those other young and delicate children who share my sentiments, thank you so much. Thank you so much indeed!

Love,

DAVID

David Schwarz

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