

Working poor have friend in Dr. George Schneider

Milwaukee internist named 2004 Physician Citizen of the Year

By Steve Busalacchi

When the physician introduced himself to a new patient, her response caught him off guard. "I'm sorry that I had to come here," she said. George Lange, MD, assured her that no apology was necessary and that he was sorry she fell through the holes in our health care safety net.

Doctor Lange is among 40 physicians recruited by George Schneider, MD, and his wife Kathleen Schneider to volunteer at the Greater Milwaukee Free Clinic in West Allis. "Inspiring" is the word Lange uses to describe Schneider, who he trained under as a medical student.

In addition to his full-time practice, Dr Schneider has served as medical director for the free clinic since he and Kathleen founded it in 1995. The clinic, located next door to his office in the same building, is open Tuesdays and Thursdays after 5 p.m.

For his ongoing dedication to this enterprise, the Wisconsin Medical Society named Schneider the 2004 Physician Citizen of the Year.

"There is no greater selfless act than to offer medical help to those who have nowhere else to turn," said Society President Michael Reineck, MD, during the awards ceremony held earlier this year.

Most recently, the *Small Business Times* bestowed the clinic with its Community Service Award for being a "health care hero," and Mount Mary College just named Kathleen Schneider, a past Alliance president, "Woman of the Year" for her extensive volunteer efforts.

The Schneiders' clinic typically serves patients who don't qualify for

government programs and can't afford health insurance, even though they do have full time jobs.

"They may not be the greatest paying—insurance is offered, benefits are offered—but they're too expensive so they decline it," explains Dr. Schneider.

With start-up funding from the Medical Society of Milwaukee County, the Schneiders led the way to establish a free clinic after the key initial supporters of the idea passed away. Doctor Schneider emphasizes that his wife, who serves as chair of the Clinic Board and as Executive Director, did most of the legwork in establishing the clinic and she continues to serve a critical role in maintaining it. Kathleen volunteers 25-30 hours per week at the free clinic, in addition to her full-time job at Dr Schneider's office. She's been juggling both responsibilities for nine years.

"If it was not for Kathy Schneider, there would be no Greater Milwaukee Free Clinic," states Dr Schneider, who credits her with fundraising, supervising volunteers, and handling day-to-day administrative tasks.

She, in turn, describes her husband as "kind-hearted" and the "anchor that holds (the clinic) together." One way he manages to do that is by appealing to colleagues for volunteer service when complicated cases cannot be handled at the free clinic.

"I have nothing but praise for the docs that I've contacted," said Dr Schneider. "They've been so willing to see these people and do whatever it takes. Sometimes you're talking about a major surgical procedure, or follow



Photo courtesy of the Medical College of Wisconsin, Jeremy A. Podolski

and treat a patient with cancer." He can recall only one instance where a doctor turned him down.

More help is needed as the demand for care grows. A single volunteer physician can no longer handle the clinic's patient load, so the clinic recently started having two doctors seeing patients. This year, there have been 1700 patient visits—20% more than last year, according to Kathleen Schneider.

How long can this dynamic duo continue to compensate for the shortcomings in our health care system, given that they're running an all-volunteer enterprise that operates entirely on donated funds?

"They're both sort of indispensable," says Dr Lange, "because what happens if something happens to them? I don't see the need going away soon. It's a huge commitment."

Editor's note: To make a contribution or volunteer at the Greater Milwaukee Free Clinic, call 414.546.1130.

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