

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

An Underwater Bond

BY CHARLES McCLUNG, D.O.

I've heard the statement, "Medicine is my life!" from students and colleagues many times during my career as a family practitioner.

I love medicine, the patients I care for, and the science that makes it possible to use modern technology to create or even extend a better life for my patients. Medicine is my passion and, at times, even my obsession. However, medicine is not my life.

After office hours, I engage myself with my family, religion, friends, and by serving as a scuba diving instructor certified by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI). These aspects of my life—along with being a physician—make me feel like a complete person. I find it important to remind aspiring physicians rotating with me that they will need to find a balance in order to keep their passion for medicine burning long and bright.

I discovered scuba diving several years ago, at the age of 46 years, when a neighbor invited me to participate in a beginner's class he was teaching. From the moment I stepped in and placed the regulator in my mouth to take my first breath underwater, I knew I was hooked. I had found something that I loved almost as much as being a doctor.

Bonding Through Scuba

I was so excited that I drove my family to frustration talking about how amazing the sport was and how proud I was to have actually completed my certification. So excited, in fact, I continued on

to the advanced class, and then to the rescue, wreck diving, dry suit, nitrox, and other classes. My health started to improve, as did my quality of life.

My son, Scott, was stationed with the Army in Florida and became a certified diver while there. We immediately bonded in a way that we never had before. Together we traveled to Belize, braved the ocean and, 10 long days later, we came home as proud dive masters. We went diving every chance we got.

West Virginia lacks an abundance of open water areas so we saved and planned annual trips to places like Cozumel, Mexico, and Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles. Unfortunately, our dive team was about to be put through the test of separation. Enter Operation Iraqi Freedom.

On Father's Day 2004, I watched Scott and the 756th EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) Company leave for Baghdad. It would be a year before I would see Scott again and my heart was broken. As tears streamed down my face, I had no idea how my son would survive the trials of war as a bomb specialist. I had no idea how I would survive his absence.

The answer came with his second e-mail home. We talked diving. Our e-mails consisted of new diving technologies and equipment, dive plans, dive sites, and planned trips. My son-in-



Dr. Charles McClung (left) and son Scott formed a small dive company for returning war veterans.

COURTESY DR. CHARLES McCLUNG

law joined the effort and became certified. Instead of fearing the worst, we all were able to focus on a positive plan to dive when, not if, Scott came home.

Scott did indeed come home. We celebrated by taking a dive trip to Cozumel. He married a lovely young lady and, just a few months later, his unit deployed back to Iraq. We began another year of e-mail exchanges filled with discussions of diving, anything to help Scott focus on the future.

My wife became certified in scuba diving, as did our daughter. We even got matching shark and dolphin tattoos.

I became an instructor and started teaching classes for area youth. We fo-

cused on the positive and saturated Scott with our diving news.

Dive Company for Soldiers

Scott once again returned home safely, and we enjoy diving together every chance we get. There is no way to describe the peaceful feeling that comes when you are floating 60 feet underwater with your family. The amazing world of water and sea life gives us perspective on what life is all about. It has kept my family focused on the good when we could have focused on the bad.

Scott is currently taking the instructor's course, our daughter and son-in-law will soon be dive masters, and we have formed a small dive company.

With war comes after effects. Many of our young service men and women suffer from physical injuries such as amputations and limited mobility.

The goal of our dive company is to provide instruction to such heroes so they may enjoy the freedom of movement that scuba diving provides.

Far too many returning veterans, including Scott, suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. This disorder can make everyday life difficult, and the need for something positive to focus on is great. These veterans need to feel at peace with their present and past. Although I am not a mental health provider, I consider my son's opinions to be valid. Diving puts him at peace and lets his mind rest. He can focus on the positive and leave the memories of war behind. ■

DR. McCLUNG practices family medicine in Lewisburg, W.V.

Ohio Physician Offers Medical Home, Part-Time Practice

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

When Dr. Lisa Larkin started her practice in 2002, she traded in a stable, academic career for night-call and a \$150,000 business loan.

Today, the Cincinnati practice is thriving, with about 4,800 patients and seven providers who work as a team to provide comprehensive care. And Dr. Larkin is able to practice medicine on her own terms—providing patients with a medical home and offering her all-female staff of physicians the opportunity to work flexible, part-time schedules.

"I really have a model that's working great that I think both patients and physicians are really, really happy with," Dr. Larkin said.

But getting to that point was a challenge. Dr. Larkin, who spent more than a decade working at the University of Cincinnati, decided in 2002 to strike out on her own and build an innovative practice. So with the help of her medical assistant—now her practice manager—and a hefty business loan, she started a solo practice.

For the first year, she worked 5 days a week and took call every day. She didn't make any money in the first 12 months. Even though some of her university patients followed her.

"It was a big financial gamble, but something that I really felt like I wanted to do to create a model that wasn't being done elsewhere," Dr. Larkin said.

One of the big differences between Dr. Larkin's practice and most primary care practices is the length of patient visits. New patient appointments are 40 minutes and follow-up appointments are 20 minutes. On average, Dr. Larkin and her colleagues each see about 22-24 patients a day, not the typical 35.

To support coordinated care, Dr. Larkin subleases space in her office to a variety of subspecialists, such as gynecologists and cardiologists. She works with other providers to offer a group weight-loss program, monthly diabetes classes, and special lectures on health and wellness topics. She also distributes a regular e-newsletter and plans to expand access to the lectures through a podcast featured on her Web site.

The other focus of the practice is on customer service. Dr. Larkin said the staff aims to be as accessible as possible by phone and e-mail for billing questions, health advice, and appointment scheduling. The staff also tries to go the extra mile for patients when they run into problems getting insurance authorization for medications and tests.

Staffing was one of the areas where Dr. Larkin wanted her practice to be different. Rather than recruiting a full complement of full-time internists, Dr. Larkin made a point of looking for female physicians who were interested in part-time medical practice. The plan fit in to her goal of providing more opportunities for women in their childbearing years, and it turned out to be a re-

cruiting advantage because the large primary care organizations in the Cincinnati area weren't interested in hiring part-time employees.

"I really want to make it work for other women," said Dr. Larkin, the mother of two teenagers. "I believe that it can work. I believe that women bring tremendous things to the practice of medicine and really offer things different than men sometimes."

Managing the schedules of several part-time employees isn't as straightforward as a traditional work schedule, but it can be achieved with effective communication, a supportive team environment, and creative scheduling, Dr. Larkin said. Currently, she is the only full-time physician in the practice; most of the other physicians work 2 or 3 days a week. In order to keep the exam rooms full and appointments running on time, the physicians plan their group schedule a year in advance, and they cover for each other when their colleagues are on vacation.

That type of teamwork and camaraderie is central to successfully creating a medical home for patients, said Dr. Eric Warm, an associate professor of clinical medicine at the University of Cincinnati, who is familiar with Dr. Larkin's practice.

In an effort to cover rising costs, Dr. Larkin has introduced an annual administrative fee in her practice. The fee—\$75 the first year and \$50 a year thereafter—covers administrative services not covered by insurance. ■