

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Physicians Take the Stage

According to Dr. Joel Ang, his vocation as a full-time family physician and his avocation as a violinist are irrevocably intertwined.

In family medicine, he explained, “you have to think of a patient as someone who is multidimensional. In music, you do the same thing. You’re trying to put things together, trying to work on very specific details of that piece. I learn a lot of medicine through the music and playing the violin because you have to think that way. The thought process is the same.”

Born in the Philippines, Dr. Ang was raised in Raleigh, N.C., where he started playing violin at the age of 12 years in an orchestra at the public school he attended and went on to excel with the instrument. He enrolled in music camps each summer, played in state orchestras in high school, and earned a spot in the Duke University Symphony in Durham, N.C., as a college undergraduate.

He kept playing during medical school—though not as much as he would

have liked—and viewed his avocation as “a way to keep stress from building up.”

As he improved, he became intrigued by the technical demands of the violin, noting that “a lot of brain power and technical work is required before you achieve proficiency with the instrument,” said Dr. Ang, who practices family medicine in Washington. “You’re using a lot more of your right brain in actually producing that, letting that happen. Allowing emotion to come out of the instrument is an incredible experience.”

These days, Dr. Ang is a violinist with the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association orchestra and serves as its associate concertmaster (www.wmpamusic.org). He is also a member of the World Doctors Orchestra, which convenes twice a year for concerts in different cities around the globe and donates concert proceeds to charity (www.world-doctors-orchestra.org). The group’s most recent performance was in Berlin on July 4, 2009, an experience that was unforgettable for Dr. Ang.

“The music our conductor chose was pretty difficult, a piece by [the late composer] Gustav Mahler,” he said. “The symphony was about 75 minutes long, and we only had 4 days to rehearse before the performance. We played from 9 a.m. until about 6 p.m. each day. It was a pretty intense time, but it was good because I shared it with close to 100 other physicians. It was inspirational to me.”

Dr. Ang practices on a daily basis and is currently taking private lessons from a violinist with the National Symphony Orchestra. “I keep myself pretty full with the music,” he said. “The good thing is that I think it really balances out my life, and I meet incredible people. I feel extremely fortunate.”

Steered Clear of Burnout

When Dr. Marilyn Kellam started practicing internal medicine in 1985, she

quickly realized that she could easily become a “serious workaholic” if she didn’t find an outlet for creativity.

“I could see it coming that I could spend all of my time in the hospital taking care of patients,” said Dr. Kellam, who currently practices at Shore Memorial Hospital in Nassawadox, Va.

Her outlet became singing, an avocation she pursued after attending a production of “The Fantasticks” at the local Trawler Dinner Theater. The cast members “looked like they were having so much fun,” recalled Dr. Kellam. After the show, attendees were informed that the theatre’s next production would be Camelot. Dr. Kellam decided that she “would like to get involved with that show in some way,” so she auditioned and earned a role as a tree.

“I also got a part as a singer and dancer as part of the chorus,” she said. “At the first rehearsal, I was totally hooked.”

Mindful that she would benefit from professional voice training she enrolled at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore in Princess Anne and took personal lessons from voice teacher Dr. Gerald W. Johnson for several years, developing a proficiency in classical music style. She performed in about 35 productions at the Trawler Dinner Theater before it closed in 2000.

Determined to pursue singing as a creative outlet, she auditioned for a role in a production of Turandot staged by the Norfolk-based Virginia Opera (www.vaopera.org). She earned a role in the chorus, and since then has performed in about two Virginia Opera



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productions each year and has understudied for some principal roles as well.

“When I’m involved with an opera it only involves 2 months of my time,” she said. “But it’s an intense amount of time. It involves rehearsals Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday, and commuting 60 miles each way.”

Some patients who are aware of her avocation worry about losing their physician to a career in music, but Dr. Kellam assures them she’s not about to leave medicine. “If I had to make my living as a musician, it would lose the joy, because now it’s just that: sheer joy,” she said. “I don’t have to worry about the business of music.”

By Doug Brunk

E-MAIL US YOUR STORIES

The purpose of “The Rest of Your Life” is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.



Dr. Marilyn Kellam played Carrie Pipperidge in “Carousel.”

Mindfulness Program Staves Off Primary Care Burnout

BY MARY ANN MOON

An educational program in “mindful” communication produced striking improvements in primary care physicians’ symptoms of burnout, according to a recent report.

By enhancing physicians’ attention to their own feelings and experiences, the 52-hour program not only reduced participants’ distress but also increased their empathy for patients and their ability to deliver patient-centered care, Dr. Tait D. Shanafelt said in an editorial comment accompanying the report.

“Physicians in the United States will face a host of new challenges over the next decade as the nation reforms its health care system,” and the restructuring will likely “increase the already epidemic levels of burnout among physi-

cians and overwhelm those currently near their limits.” In response, some physicians will feel compelled to withdraw from their work. But this study “demonstrates that training physicians in the art of mindful practice has the potential to promote physician health through work,” said Dr. Shanafelt, director of the Program on Physician Well-Being at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. (*JAMA* 2009;302:1338-40).

In the study, Dr. Michael S. Krasner and his associates at the University of Rochester (N.Y.) evaluated a continuing education course that they had designed to “enhance the physician-patient relationship through reflective practices that help the practitioner explore the domains of control and meaning in the clinical encounter” (*JAMA* 2009;302:1284-93).

The program, spread over the course

of 1 year, includes an intensive phase with 8 weekly 2.5-hour sessions plus one all-day session toward the end of this phase, followed by a maintenance phase of 10 monthly 2.5-hour sessions.

Each session begins with a brief presentation of that week’s theme and may include guided meditation exercises, large-group discussions, writing brief stories about personal experiences in medical practice, and sharing the written stories in pairs and small groups.

Throughout the program, participants are taught mindfulness—“paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Mindfulness includes lowering one’s reactivity to challenging experiences; noticing and experiencing one’s thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, even when they are unpleasant; and act-

ing with awareness and attention instead of “on autopilot.”

A total of 70 Rochester-area internal medicine, family medicine, and pediatric physicians participated in the program. These study subjects were assessed at five different times before, during, and after the program.

Study subjects showed “striking” improvements in self-awareness and well-being, which included decreases in emotional exhaustion, depression, tension, and fatigue, as well as increases in feelings of personal accomplishment, vigor, and empathy.

The study was funded by the Physicians’ Foundation for Health Systems Excellence and sponsored by the New York chapter of the American College of Physicians. Dr. Krasner and Dr. Shanafelt reported no financial conflicts.