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Physician Spotlight

Eric J. Sacknoff, MD

By BRIDGET GARLAND

"It has been very gratifying to come to an area where I feel like I can contribute," shared Eric Sacknoff, MD, chief of urology at Smyth County Community Hospital in Marion, Virginia, an area far different from his previous position in Cambridge, Mass. "There are 110 urologists in the Boston area; you don't need 111."

Sacknoff left his 28-years of practice and position as president of Cambridge Urological Associates to practice in the rural areas of southwest Virginia. When Sacknoff moved here in 2006, the area had no full-time urologist, and as he explained, "I had accomplished a lot of things over those 28 years, and I wanted to go to a place where I felt was underserved and needed a modern urology practice. . . The area had only part-time urology providers, who were unable to serve the steep urologic needs of the community."

Sacknoff stepped up to the challenge and headed to the remote area which would appeal to both his desire to serve, as well as his outside interest in fly fishing. "This is a beautiful area in which to fly fish, and as an active member of Trout Unlimited, a conservation organization in the continental US and Alaska, I was surprised there was no chapter in this region," Sacknoff noted.

Quickly acclimating, Sacknoff set up practice, established a regional chapter of Trout Unlimited in 2007, and became very active in the local Rotary International organization, helping to raise money for various needs in the area. Never one to be inactive, Sacknoff was also elected president of the Virginia Urological Society last



year, and just finished his term. "I like being busy," Sacknoff added.

Originally from Portland, Maine, Sacknoff attended Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, as an undergraduate majoring in Biology. He continued at Tufts University School of Medicine, graduating in 1971. He then did three years of general surgery at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center, and then went back to Boston to Massachusetts General Hospital to do his urology residency. He joined the staff at Massachusetts General, and still currently serves as an assistant professor of Urology at Harvard Medical School.

From early on in his education, Sacknoff knew that medicine was what he wanted to pursue. "I've always been a science-oriented student, so medicine came naturally, as it was a good explanation of how things worked," he said. "But I also I felt that I had the people skills to help diagnose and treat the psychological and physical issues that people have and need help with. I like the idea of taking an ac-

tive part in the solution of people's problems."

His decision to go into urology, however, was made later in medical school when he decided that surgery was more interesting to him than internal medicine. "You can fix the disease, and you feel as if you are playing a more integral part in the disease process," he recalled. "Urology is a fascinating specialty because one can make the diagnosis 95 percent of the time and help people 95 percent of the time, and there is no other specialty like that."

Sacknoff stays very active within his specialty and continues to educate other urologists about his research interests. Over the past 30 years, he has traveled to over seven countries and taught over 5000 urologists how to use the laser in urological surgery, and has served as the chairman of the urological section of the American Laser Society. "We use it for prostate conditions, for bladder cancer and urethral strictures, as well as to break up kidney stones and treat skin lesions on the genitals. There is a broad spectrum of indications," he explained. "We recently presented a new laser wave length that was previously only used in the military, but it has now been approved for clinical use."

Notably, Sacknoff's use of the laser for prostate and bladder cancer at Smyth County Community Hospital was the first hospital to use it in the United States.

Such innovative procedures have been a great benefit to the rural areas of southwest Virginia. Not only is such technology rarely available in rural health settings, but the high incidence of urological diseases in the area makes Sacknoff's practice even more valuable. "The region from West

Virginia, to Virginia, through East Tennessee and North Carolina, geologically, has limestone—or calcium carbonate—in the ground, as a common stone. It will break down and then leach into the water table, causing a high incidence of kidney stones because people drink the water," explained Sacknoff. "The patients don't know this because of the lack of education; they think it's inherited. I see high school students every week with kidney stones; that is not inherited, it's environmental. You have to drink distilled water, which contains no calcium."

As he explained, education is an important component in the practice of rural medicine. "As providers, we have the chance to be the absolute role model of medical health education, being in a rural setting," Sacknoff said. "The media provides the information, but in a rural setting, people are so busy just trying to survive that they don't absorb all the information that is out there."

Sacknoff routinely talks with his patients about important health information that they may not normally take the time to learn. "When families are just barely able to make it, they don't think as much about fitness and nutrition. And so many times, I'm in a situation where I am able to help, educate, and guide people."

Sacknoff's wife Carol travels around the United States for the development office of Concord Academy, a private high school in Concord, Massachusetts, where she has worked for 33 years. The couple share eight adult children and three grandchildren, who are scattered across the United States, with careers ranging from law, education, international relations, software, banking, Sam Adams Beer, and even executive headhunting.



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