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Physician Spotlight

Tully Patrowicz, MD

Ophthalmologist, Sumter Vision Center

By JEFF WEBB

SUMTERVILLE - It's not every day you come across an octogenarian who is still working part-time. And it is even more uncommon to find one who is a practicing physician. But it is downright rare to find an 83-year-old ophthalmologist who has three jobs that keep him busy six days a week.

"I'm always happy to get a little time off," quipped Tully Patrowicz, MD, who, when he's not seeing patients in his private practice at Sumter Vision Center, treats inmates at the federal penitentiary in Coleman and cares for veterans at the VA Medical Centers in Orlando and The Villages. "All these jobs add up to a full-time job," said Patrowicz, adding that he has no plans to slow down. "I'd like to be productive as long as I can."

Indeed, Patrowicz has been productive, for himself and many others, during his six-or-so decades of professional and public service. Earlier this year he was honored as the founder of We Care of Lake County, a program that recently celebrated its 20th year of volunteer specialty physicians providing care to uninsured and under-insured residents.

In 1994, he was on the board of directors of the Lake-Sumter Medical Society and recognized the need to "help those who were falling through the cracks...People who were too well off for Medicaid, but not well-off enough to have their own insurance or working for an employer who could provide insurance," he said. Patrowicz, who was serving on the board of the North Lake County Hospital District at the time, gathered private and public support for financing the program, which was modeled after an initiative put forth by the Florida Medical Association, he said. "We got 100 physicians to sign up right off the bat, and then it grew to 200 physicians and 30 dentists, and the hospitals agreed to provide services gratis, too. It really took off," said Patrowicz. The Lake County Board of County Commissioners, the United Way and a network of private philanthropists now fund the program.

"To me, it's what medicine should be all about – healthcare for everyone. No



matter their circumstances, (we) need to take care of them. And if they can't afford it, you still take care of them," said Patrowicz.

That dedication to patients was extolled by Carol Millwater, executive director of We Care of Lake County. "Though I didn't have the privilege of meeting Dr. Patrowicz in his younger years, I can only imagine what a powerhouse of energy, passion and determination he must have been. He is the consummate professional, has always had his finger on the pulse of community medical needs, and holds a higher standard for the greater good," said Millwater. "Because of his vision, (We Care) continues to flourish as an important safety net for those who cannot afford specialty medical care."

That brand of public service, Patrowicz said, "has played a vital role in my life. Why? Unlike the practice of medicine, public service provides a broad base of concern for humanity's well-being and is not solely dedicated to matters of health."

Patrowicz' public service also was diverse. He served 9 years, under three different governors, on the Florida Board of Medicine. He also was appointed by the Secretary of State to serve four years on the Florida Council on Arts and Culture. "I have always believed that physicians have much to bring to the public forum relating to life's persistent questions involving social, economic and cultural

concerns. Most physicians, by virtue of background and training, are uniquely attuned to the fundamental needs of people. Public service is another important means of addressing the simple idea that life is mostly about others," said Patrowicz.

That realization – that life is mostly about others – came very early in Patrowicz' life, when he met and "fell corps perdu in love" with Connie Starin, at Bayside High School on Long Island, N.Y. Patrowicz grew up the only child of Edward Frank Patrowicz and Beatrice Lufkin Patrowicz. His father, a musician known professionally as Eddie Patrowicz, had an illustrious career as a big-band trumpet player in New York City and traveled the world. His mother was a talented pianist. Despite his parents' best efforts, Patrowicz did not apply himself to music. "My father told me that one day I'd be sorry I didn't practice music. The truth is that I am sorry every day," he said.

Just before Patrowicz graduated from Columbia University in 1953, he vetoed his parents' worries that he was not yet able to support a wife financially. "We took matters into our own hands and eloped," he said. After he graduated, the happy couple moved to Memphis, where he enrolled at the Southern College of Optometry. Upon graduation, they moved to Indiana for more training at Indiana University. In 1958 they moved to

Florida, where he had not visited since he was a senior in high school, with the intent of establishing an optometry practice in Ft. Pierce. He soon concluded that "optometry was limiting what I was capable of doing. It was not very satisfying," he said.

"I did not want my practice to be commercial, and commercialism was rampant in the community," he said, so he started teaching math and science in public schools, eventually applying to medical school at the University of Miami. After earning his MD in 1968, he headed north to complete his residency at the University of Florida. He was planning to move to Vero Beach, but a patient urged him to open a practice in Lake County. "She said they were desperately in need of an ophthalmologist in the area of Mount Dora and Eustis. When I looked into it she was right, there was a real need...And the area was beautiful," he recalled.

Since 1972, Patrowicz has served thousands of patients – some span three generations – and he has done so at his own stride. "My philosophy has never been to try to see as many people as the day would allow. I would work long hours, but never would I rush people," he said. "I see a trend now, because of the way reimbursements are made, that physicians are feeling more and more squeezed by the demands of insurance companies and the federal government. There is an emphasis on how many people they can see. I will not do that. That is neither in my patients' or my best interests."

As busy as he has been, Patrowicz has made time to pursue personal hobbies, which include boating (he sailed for most of his life, but now has a trawler) and wood-working (building cabinets and tables inspired by George Nakashima). He's also answering the long-ago plea of his parents by self-teaching piano. "You're never too old to learn," he said.

But Patrowicz' most cherished accomplishment has been his family, which includes three children and five grown grandchildren, and his 62-year marriage to Connie. "My marriage has been the most important thing in my life. Nothing surpasses that. If you have to put things on a list, that would be far and away number one."