

Busybodies & Brotherly Love

by Charlotte Huff

Bladen County Hospital builds a healthier community one neighbor at a time

Ronald Lyon's vision had started blurring over newsprint. The Elizabethtown, N.C., teacher was already watching his sugar intake fanatically and knew from classes put on by Bladen County Hospital that his diabetes precluded the stress of even an occasional round of golf. But 53-year-old Lyon soon found that daily walks weren't the cure, either. "It felt like someone had taken a bat to the balls of my feet."

After more trips to Bladen's HealthWatch office, Lyon now takes a load off his nerve-damaged soles by climbing aboard an exercise bike every day. But he's still passionate about blood sugar--and for good reason: "Just go out and eat, drink, and be merry. You'll be dead real quick."

Bladen County, tucked away in southeastern North Carolina, is "one county away from the coast where all the retirees are going, and one county away from Interstate 95, where all the businesses are going," says Leo A. Petit Jr., CEO of Bladen County Hospital, winner of the 1997 Foster G. McGaw Prize for community service, a \$75,000 award sponsored by the Baxter Allegiance Foundation and the American Hospital Association. A meatpacking plant has altered the landscape somewhat, but the 900-square-mile county has deep roots in cotton, peanuts, and tobacco.

And deep personal roots, says local attorney Donna Payne, who lived in Australia and Texas before coming home to raise her teenagers. "It's a very close-knit community. I came back because of the people--our problems have faces here."

Poor health habits, like a steady diet of fried foods, are among those problems. Affording medical care is another. The average income is only \$15,500, and a third of the nearly 30,000 residents are underinsured or lack any coverage at all. One in every four expectant mothers is a teenager. African-Americans, at high risk for diabetes, make up 39 percent of the population. The diabetes death rate, plus fatalities from heart attacks and strokes, exceeds state averages.

When people here get sick, it's likely their medical care will be linked in some way to the Bladen County Hospital Rural Health Network. Since the early 1990s, the 62-bed, county-owned hospital has served as both catalyst and hub for the network's expanding services, including an urgent care center, rural health clinics, and a nearby

seven-doctor medical practice. Once medically underserved, the county now almost meets the state average in doctors, says Petit.

But if the network provides the framework, it's HealthWatchers who give it heart--and vigilance. Nearly 1,000 strong, with 400 in the workplace and the rest in the community, they organize health workshops, make referrals to the HealthWatch office, and generally keep an eye on their neighbors. If the girl down the street gets pregnant, a HealthWatcher will remind her that the nearby rural clinic offers prenatal care--and may even help her get there. The program's logo: two women chatting over a fence.

"We live in the Bible Belt, and we believe in this brotherly love stuff," says Ann Elks, an assistant school superintendent and one of the original HealthWatch task force members. "We're busybodies. It's not prying; it's caring."

The good-neighbor payoff, say advocates, can be seen in the sharp drop in infant mortality, from 18 percent in 1992 to 9 percent in 1995. Last fall no kindergartener faced discharge because of inadequate immunizations; the year before, 31 discharge letters were sent out. And at a recent Rotary Club luncheon, says school superintendent Byron Lawson, half the attendees passed up the country-style steak and fried chicken for salad. "I think we are starting to defeat the apathy" about health, says Lawson, who himself has dropped a dozen pounds.

When CEO Petit arrived in 1987 from Massachusetts, Bladen County Hospital hadn't been accredited since the 1970s and was losing money fast--\$500,000 that year alone. At the lowest point, only eight doctors practiced in the county.

Petit rolled up his sleeves and launched a series of evening "retreats" with hospital officials and medical staff. At first the driving force was hospital survival and what that meant to the area. "How do you sell Bladen County to future economic development when we're the fourth-largest county in North Carolina and we just lost our hospital?" asks town manager Jim Freeman of Elizabethtown. Petit also papered the community with "Please Tell Me" feedback forms, complete with a hand-drawn, nearly bald caricature of himself in the bottom right-hand corner, courtesy of his wife.

Elks got to know Petit better when he toured the county during the hospital's successful 1989 bond drive. The \$3.5 million raised, along with a \$350,000 Duke Endowment grant, paid for a major renovation of the 1951 facility, including new medical-surgical units, a new emergency department, and a birthing center. "I appreciated that," says Elks. "He really did not have to work that hard. He was almost eligible to retire when he came here--he told us that. He could have sat back."

After the hospital was accredited in 1992, Elks decided to attend one

of the first meetings of what later became HealthWatch. She was intrigued by the idea of using neighborhood crime watch strategies to foster better grassroots health. "What we are putting into the rumor mill," says HealthWatch director Joy Grady, "is good health practices."

The first HealthWatchers were 10 members of a quilting bee 25 miles east of Elizabethtown. All were elderly and diabetic, with no clue about controlling the disease. Today, community encourager Kendra Sutton speaks about HealthWatch at churches, schools, social groups--wherever a door is opened. If she strikes a chord, she returns to host sessions on weight management, blood pressure, and better sleep habits. Sometimes she'll run right into a wall of stubbornness--but news still gets around. At least half of the 4,500 people who have used the storefront HealthWatch center learned about it by word of mouth.

Now when physician Pearly Graham-Hoskins diagnoses a patient with diabetes, she can write a prescription for the center, which hosts a support group that keeps Ronald Lyon and fellow diabetics on track.

Hoskins and her Bladen colleagues still encounter plenty of obstacles. Doctors must talk up the skills of physician extenders--and that's helping to overcome reluctance to receive care from them at rural health clinics. The community's historic ties to tobacco also have made smoking cessation tough to tackle, says Grady. HealthWatch has sponsored some classes in the workplace. But participation has lagged.

Recently, county officials have begun using a novel video triage program at schools to weed out kids with minor ailments from those in real need of medical attention. The problem has always been that when a parent on hourly wage has to leave work to pick up a sick child, the lost income can be a financial drain. But with one nurse stretched across 14 schools, says Lawson, there's generally no one on hand to tell the difference between a discomfort and something more serious. "Unless we have a reason to think the child is a malingerer we have to call the parent."

The hospital stepped in, fronting about \$10,000 for start-up computer equipment linking one elementary school to a physician extender at a nearby clinic. Blood pressure equipment and a video camera sophisticated enough to discern a bruise or rash are attached. The idea is less diagnosis than guidance, says Elks. "They'd have a better idea whether it was a problem that could wait" until classes are dismissed.

Late last year the pilot project's technical kinks were still being worked out. But officials aren't worried. You have to be flexible, they say, if money is short. That wisdom has paid off in the past. The video triage idea wasn't even raised until funding for a mobile health clinic fell through. In fact, HealthWatch itself grew out of an infant

mortality task force that failed to make headway.

Speaking of flexibility, Grady has managed to get more and more local residents up and walking. After hearing about exercise programs in suburban malls, she applied the idea to Elizabethtown streets. Booklets with color-coded trails were printed, and Sneaker Net was born.

So many people have been pounding the aging sidewalks--some dating to the Depression era and cracked by tree roots--that the town recently spent about \$30,000 on pavement repair. But the expense has been worth it. Come to Elizabethtown this spring, says town manager Freeman, and you'll see people up and about at 5 a.m., stepping out to better health in the dawn's early light.

This article first appeared in the February 5 1998 issue of Hospitals & Health Networks