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Dr. John M. Tedeschi champions family wellness with a personal touch

By RENEE WINKLER • For the Courier-Post •
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Long before healthcare was the top story on the nightly news, one South Jersey doctor was quietly revolutionizing the way family medicine was practiced in the region.

Dr. John M. Tedeschi, whose duties have expanded from care of infants, toddlers and teenagers to coordinating medical services to benefit both youngsters and adults, is such a health care leader that an entire institute, Virtua's Pediatric Institute, is named in his honor.

Tedeschi, 71, continues to greet each day and each challenge with a bright smile, and often a touch as well.

"I'm a touchy, feely guy," he said recently in his Marlton office of Advocare, a corporation that coordinates the delivery of medical care. Formerly the Children's Health Alliance, it shares the building with Continuum Health Alliance staff, who handle the less exciting but essential chores of administration and billing.

Here, where furniture and supplies were moved in during the Dec. 19 blizzard, carpeting still smelled like the warehouse and Post-Its were in place on large glass walls and doorways waiting for the installation of metal bars to prevent visitors and employees from walking into them.

Tedeschi, who lives in Haddonfield, shows the same open spirit to billing clerks as to former patients and high-level politicians. There isn't a person in the building who doesn't get a smile or a "thanks for a job well done."

Chris Midora, whose job with Exotic Foliage had her stripping dead leaves from greens and watering orchids on a wintry day within the glass-enclosed walkway at Advocare, said she was pleased to realize he was the in-charge man at the building. Midora and her brother met Tedeschi when they were waiting for a medical procedure for their mother in a Burlington County hospital.

"He wasn't my mother's doctor for sure, but he saw that we were distressed and he stopped to give us some support. He said she was in good hands and it was comforting to us.

"I remember his smile, the way it lit the area around us. When I saw him walking down the hallway here, I was so happy that I could have a role in brightening his surroundings," she said.

Tedeschi's work philosophy is simple: You have to love what you're doing so much that you want to get up every day and go to work, or find something else. His day often begins at 4:30 a.m., an indication of how enthused he still is about his career choice.

When Tedeschi faced the realization more than two decades ago that so many physicians were so bogged down in "the business part of healing" that they were losing chunks of time they preferred to spend on what they loved and were trained for, he did something about it. He established the Children's Health Alliance in 1988, focusing on the coordination of 10 pediatric services in South Jersey offices.

Today, the group has changed its name to Advocare, reflecting its ever-growing alliance of medical practices with patients of all ages. At the start of 2010, Advocare included more than 100 primary care physicians, along with dozens of specialists and nurse practitioners. (A listing of Advocare members and locations is available at www.advocaredoctors.com.)

In general, Tedeschi said, doctors "love the study of medicine, love tracking the advances in their field and dealing with people. Instead we were getting mired in the billing and other administrative chores essential to smoothing the delivery of the doctoring part of medical care."

While the regionalization and organization of medical care is significant, Tedeschi's heart remains with the children and their parents.

"As doctors, our goal is to help parents do their job better, to become better families," he said. Parents' responsibilities, sometimes taken up today by grandparents and other caregivers, extend beyond checking for a fever, a rash, or a swollen joint.

"Family values are so important. Without them, children might be medically healthy," says Tedeschi, but they founder emotionally.

"What I love is caring for children, watching them grow and become parents themselves," said Tedeschi, whose love of babies has been recharged with the birth of his first grandchild, Nicoletta, the daughter of his son John, also a pediatrician.

Tedeschi and his wife, Geraldine, also have a daughter, Elizabeth, a lawyer in Philadelphia who, he says, reminds them often that she is "still the baby in the family."

"I'm happy when colleagues call me for something specific, asking me to look at a case with fresh eyes, a fresh thought," Tedeschi said.

Virtua's Pediatric Institute pulls together medical resources to cover specialties including orthopedics and anesthesiology, and also helps match the medical needs of a child or teenager combating obesity or mental health or behavioral problems. Intensive care staff and life support experts are on hand, as well as personnel to help with newborn screenings and home health services.

Rather than duplicate services, the institute is based on cooperation among all the region's medical centers with a emphasis on childhood care, including Nemours' Alfred I. DuPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

Now the chief executive officer and chairman of the Virtua's Pediatric Institute, Tedeschi had been chief of pediatrics, and later president of the medical staff at Garden State Community Hospital. He was chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at West Jersey Hospital at Voorhees before Virtua became the parent medical center for those facilities as well as hospitals in Mount Holly, Berlin, and an out-patient medical center in Camden.

It's not a bad place to land for a man who was born near Third and Benson Streets in South Camden, where his father was a grocer. When he was 12, his family moved to Pennsauken and Tedeschi went to Camden Catholic High School and later, on an academic scholarship, to Villanova University and then to Creighton University School of Medicine in Omaha, Nebraska, where his education and training continued to be touched by the Jesuits.

Once out of medical school, Tedeschi returned home to South Jersey where he completed his internship and residency at Cooper Hospital before joining the Collingswood practice of Dr. Ronald Bernardin.

"As I grew in my practice, there was a change in families. More mothers were working. The things parents wanted for their children didn't and haven't changed. Every parent wants his children to have everything. Everything now is a lot more than it was when I was starting out.

"But what children really need is you, the parent," Tedeschi said.

With working parents, or homes with only one parent, time available for children shrinks, he said. Parents try to make up for shared experiences with programmed activities and that often creates a bigger financial strain and even less time together, he said.

Tedeschi would like to see each child nestled within a family that communicates, laughs together, and works together on creating a strong moral center. But he's realistic enough to know that can't always happen.

"After I saw a patient in the examining room, I'd always talk to the parents in my consultation room. I heard of family problems, marital problems, economic issues. Knowing what the family was facing was essential to advise treatment. The doctor has to know how much energy and support is there to help a child. That always tempered my advice.

"If the family couldn't carry out my suggestions, because they didn't have the time or were battling issues of their own like addiction or strife or unemployment, I'd have to find alternatives," Tedeschi said.

One of the most successful diagnostic tools, he said, is taking time to listen to both his young patients and their parents.

"I wanted to be sure a child was never afraid to see a doctor and felt comfortable talking about how he felt and what, if anything, he was afraid of. I'd listen to the mom, because she can spot subtle differences that they know means a child is sick. It could be that a child is being bullied in school, that he's afraid of someone. It could be that a friend's parents are fighting and he hears it," Tedeschi said.

Tedeschi's responsibilities at Advocare and with the Pediatric Institute leave little time for outside interests. "I'm a professional meeting-attender," he says, laughing.

But he has retained close friendships from when he was a young professional, and before that. Dennis Shulder, now a retired patent attorney from North Brunswick, said Tedeschi "is the guy you wished lived next door when you were raising your children."

Shulder, who grew up in Oaklyn, met Tedeschi when both were freshmen at Camden Catholic High School. "My father died when I was young and I often spent time at John's house, usually in his kitchen, talking with his father and grandfather," Shulder said.

A group of five young men palled around together in the late 1950s and early 1960s, often piling into a car in the summer to go to Wildwood or Ocean City, or for an occasional trip to Garden State Park with Tedeschi's father and grandfather.

"I live 60 or 70 miles away from him now. I don't see him as often as I'd like but we try to get together for dinner. We had a good time growing up. I hope my daughters have friendships that persist, like that with the five of us did," Shulder said.

Herb Vederman of Philadelphia wasn't part of the group of Camden Catholic guys, but he's known Tedeschi for more than 40 years.

"I met him when my son was sick. I still think of him as my doctor. I recently had back surgery and I remember John floating around me in the hospital," said Vederman, a former deputy mayor in Philadelphia and later a policy adviser to Gov. Edward Rendell.

Vederman and his family were living in Cherry Hill when the pair met.

"Back then, when you brought a newborn home, the pediatrician would come to your house or apartment for a visit. Tedeschi came to us. My son had a bad first year and we saw him a lot.

"We once ran the baby to the hospital in the middle of the night. There was John in a three-piece suit and there was my son, throwing up all over him. The next time I looked, John was holding our baby, walking him up and down the hallway, patting him on the back," remembers Vederman.

Vederman and Tedeschi have homes near each other in both Longport and Palm Beach, Fla., "but he hardly ever gets there. He's always working. He still calls his (answering) service every hour. I laugh about it. My life has changed so much over the last 20, 30, 40 years, but John is still checking his service every hour, leaving dinners because a child is sick.

"He's the gentlest man you'll ever meet and the way he cares about people just shines through. If you call him, if you need him, he'll be there.

"He practices from the heart," said Vederman.