



LIVING THE MISSION: THE BIRTH OF A CARING PHYSICIAN

By Nancy Kinnally

Kacy Labuda, 28, was a little apprehensive when a change in her insurance required her to find a new obstetrician, especially since the one she found, Dr. Manny Herrera, was fresh out of residency and just establishing a new practice.

But the mother of two girls, who is now expecting her third, couldn't be happier with the way things turned out.

"He's been nothing but amazing," Labuda said. "I actually referred a co-worker who just had her baby the other day, and she's also had a wonderful experience. My prenatal visits have been very personable. If I ever have a problem I can call him directly. He's everything I ever wanted in a physician, plus."

Her review would come as no surprise to the man responsible for Herrera's residency training.

"He's mature. He's decisive, he's knowledgeable, but the biggest thing is that he goes above and beyond what's asked of him," said Dr. Amanpreet Bhullar, director of the Obstetrics & Gynecology Residency Program at Orlando Health. Herrera served as the program's chief resident in 2010, earning an award for best surgical skills from AAGL, a national society of gynecologic and laparoscopic surgeons.

Bhullar places Herrera among the top 10 physicians to pass through the residency program in the 12 years he's been associated with it, stressing his focus on making sure to leave no loose ends.

"He doesn't just do his part," Bhullar said. "You know everything that has to do with that patient will be taken care of by the time he's through."

And when Herrera tells you he's going to do something, you can take it to the bank.

Back in 2002, when he came to the FSU College of Medicine as a first-year student, Herrera said he wanted to help take care of medically underserved patients and use his language skills to reach out to Florida's growing Hispanic population.

Now in practice in Clermont, Fla., Herrera has established a practice at South Lake Hospital through which he is living up to his promise. About 75 percent of his patients are on Medicaid, and another 5 percent are on Medicare.

Going where he was needed

"When I came here, some feedback we got from many primary-care providers was that they were happy that finally someone was here who was taking Medicaid and Medicare, because many ob-gyn groups take care of Medicaid only for ob, but for gyn you will find that they do not take Medicaid, so we take it for both," Herrera said, explaining that reimbursement rates for obstetrics are higher than for gynecology.

Herrera's patients include not just women of childbearing age but also a significant number of elderly women, especially during the winter months, when Lake County's

population swells with southbound retirees. He estimates that 30 percent of his patients are Hispanic, and says many of them had been driving to Orlando to find a doctor who spoke Spanish or who accepted Medicaid.

"I went to where there were no Hispanics practicing, and probably in the future I will bring another Hispanic doctor I know from training," Herrera said, adding that he took care to hire a fully bilingual staff.

John Moore, chief operating officer at South Lake Hospital, said Herrera is filling an important need for the hospital and the community.



Herrera, shown here with a patient, works extended hours for those who are not able to take time away from their job.

HEALTHY
WOMEN
OF FLORIDA
OB/GYN
MANNY HERRERA, MD
352-241-7275

"Finding the right candidate for an ob-gyn in our service area has been a challenge," Moore said, adding that the hospital needs more providers to care for Lake County's growing population.

The county is still largely rural, with more than half its residents living in unincorporated areas. On a drive through Clermont, the county's largest city at 23,000 inhabitants, the gently rolling hills offer patchwork vistas of still undeveloped land dotted with the occasional Starbucks or Outback Steakhouse. Downtown Orlando is less than 30 miles away.

But Clermont is still the kind of place where you can get friendly service and a homemade egg salad sandwich at a café in the historic downtown, and where just down the street, Hanks Electric Co., an independent appliance dealer, has survived the arrival of Lowe's and Home Depot.

Herrera and his family have lived in the same house in rural Lake County since relocating there from Tallahassee at the start of his third year of medical school. And it's actually closer to South Lake Hospital than it was to his residency program in Orlando. A member of the college's second graduating class, the Class of 2006, Herrera spent

his third and fourth years of medical school at the Orlando campus. His son Christopher, 11, who was in first grade when they moved to Orlando, is now in middle school. His other son, Sebastian, is 10.

“My kids kind of grew up here,” Herrera said. “I was here with FSU for my last two years, and then there were four years of residency. So, I had been here already for six years, and by staying I didn’t have to move the family again, especially the kids. They were able to stay in the same schools and have the same network that had been created with their friends.”

Such factors, along with the professional connections made during residency, are among the reasons why most physicians go into practice near where they complete their residency training. And for Bhullar, the medical school’s Orlando campus has proven to be a great pipeline into the residency, where four other FSU College of Medicine alumni are currently training.

“The fact that they have a local connection and want to stay in the area and we have a great residency program to be a part of, that goes hand in hand,” Bhullar said.

Herrera stresses the quality of his training, both there and as a medical student, beginning with FSU’s emphasis on the doctor-patient relationship.

As an example, he said he has trained his staff such that when a patient leaves his office, she doesn’t just walk out with a referral slip. She knows exactly what her next steps will be.

“In this office, we go that little extra mile,” Herrera said. “When the patient says she can’t find a gastroenterologist that takes Medicaid, we pick up the phone and try to find her one. We help them coordinate the care. And that’s kind of the philosophy of Florida State. That’s where it comes from.”

Living the mission, then teaching it

Herrera’s nurse, Laura Vilardo, recalls a pregnant teenager who was also severely anemic. After finding a hematologist that accepted her insurance, the office staff learned that the hematologist took only adult patients. So they began researching further to find a pediatric hematologist who would see her.

And when older women come in who haven’t had a pap smear in several years and can’t remember their past results, instead of sending them to chase down their own medical records, Herrera’s staff contacts their former providers to get the information for them.

In addition to the bilingual staff, Herrera also offers extended hours so that his patients don’t have to take time off work to see him if that is difficult for them to do.

“I’ve been a nurse for almost 30 years. Believe me, I’ve worked with a lot of physicians,” Vilardo said. “These are little things we do that you can’t get at other offices.”

The difference shows, according to Moore.

“Dr. Herrera has met and exceeded our expectations so far as patient satisfaction, and he has also led the development of his practice and really taken ownership in making sure it succeeds,” he said. “All of this, coupled with his enthusiasm and professionalism, makes him a great asset to the hospital.”

After completing his residency June 30, 2010, Herrera went to work setting up his solo practice July 1. Within two weeks, he was seeing his first patients.

He is available to his patients 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When a patient showed up in the hospital’s emergency room at 11 p.m. and the diagnosis was an ectopic pregnancy, Herrera was there to perform emergency surgery.

After only the first six months of practice, he already had a panel of 300 patients and had done 14 deliveries. Although he had arrangements for emergency backup, he so far had done every one of his patients’ deliveries. And with many of his obstetrics patients nearing their due dates, he would soon be doing as many each month as he’d done in the first six months.

It’s rare these days to find anyone practicing obstetrics and gynecology solo, given the heavy call schedule that goes along with delivering babies and performing gynecological surgeries.

COLIN HACKLEY





COLIN HACKLEY

Herrera with his wife, Judith, and sons Christopher (left) and Sebastian.

He credits the hospital and the support of the local medical community for making it possible for him to do what few would even attempt, especially straight out of residency. The hospital's willingness to support the development of his practice, give him the option of opening an independent practice later, and absorb some of the costs of caring for his Medicaid patients helped lure Herrera to Clermont in spite of a number of attractive offers from practices in downtown Orlando.

"The rapid growth of my practice would not be possible without the help and support from the South Lake Hospital administration," Herrera said. "They are always listening and working with me to improve the care in our community."

He also is grateful for the support of local medical groups, including the ob-gyns, primary-care physicians and specialists who have welcomed him to the community and offered assistance. In particular, he appreciates the support of the emergency physicians and their staff at the hospital.

"By providing high-quality, first-line triage evaluation and many times treatment for my patients, they make a solo physician practice possible and not just a thing of the past," Herrera said.

Next on his agenda: teaching.

Herrera has joined the faculty of the College of Medicine's Orlando campus. And eventually – after he gets a partner to cover for him when he's gone – he hopes to accompany FSU medical students as a faculty member on medical outreach trips such as the one he took to Panama with FSUCares while in medical school.

"Once I'm established here, I will definitely do medical outreach for the rest of my life," Herrera said, "and not just in other countries, but also in the United States."

"In this office, we go that little extra mile. When the patient says she can't find a gastroenterologist that takes Medicaid, we pick up the phone and try to find her one. We help them coordinate the care.

And that's kind of the philosophy of Florida State."

– MANNY HERRERA, M.D., '06



COLIN HACKLEY