



## Lake Wales graduates in high-demand fields came home this summer to practice medicine

By Robin Williams Adams Your Health Correspondent

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There's constant demand for primary care doctors in Polk County and nationwide.

Recruiting urologists has been a frequent need in Polk and urology is one of four surgical specialties in which a 2016 workforce analysis predicts the greatest shortages in 2025.

So, what led two young doctors in those fields to enter practice in Lake Wales within a month of each other?

Never discount the home-field advantage.

Dr. James E. Pilkington, urologist, and Dr. Amber Shepard, family practice physician, have strong emotional ties to the Southeast Polk city.

"After I did my residency at the University of Mississippi, seeing the needs and discrepancies there," Shepard said, "I realized 'Why would I fix someone else's situation when my own community needed my help?'"

Pilkington's late mother, Linda, was a well-known health care advocate in Lake Wales, at Heart of Florida Regional Medical Center in Haines City and across Polk.

After her death, Pilkington felt a strong desire to locate near his father, Edward. He also has fond memories of his childhood and education in Lake Wales.

"Being able to serve a community that shaped me is very important to me," said Pilkington, who began seeing patients the second week of September.

He and Shepard, each 32, graduated in 2005 from Lake Wales High School (where he was valedictorian.)

Now both are with AdventHealth Medical Group, at separate locations in Lake Wales, and have privileges at AdventHealth Lake Wales. (Until Sept. 1, those were Heart of Florida Physician Group and Lake Wales Medical Center.)

Shepard began treating patients in Lake Wales on Aug. 19. She treats infants through senior citizens.

“Medicine, for me, was a calling,” Shepard said. “I’ve always known it’s what my purpose was, even as a young child.”

She chose family practice after realizing during her medical school rotations that she loved taking care of entire families.

Pilkington decided as a child, “following my mother around the hospital,” that he wanted to be a doctor. He discovered his attraction to urology during his third year of medical school.

Its technological advances — robotics and minimally invasive surgeries — attracted him, as did its balance between surgery, outpatient and inpatient care. Genitourinary surgery is among his specialties.

Nine out of 10 urologists practice in metropolitan areas, making his choice of a city the size of Lake Wales atypical. That’s fine with him.

“It’s a way of life,” Pilkington said. “I feel comfortable in a smaller community where I can be actively involved and know people.”

“It’s more personable,” Shepard said. “You’re not a number.”

Her mother and stepfather, Martha and Samuel Lamb, also are in Lake Wales, another attraction.

Polk has a severe shortage when it comes to primary care medicine, which includes family practice. Its ratio of residents to primary care doctor is 2,030 to 1, compared to 1,390 to 1 in Florida.

Reaching out early to medical students from your city may be key for smaller communities. A study reported in *Family Medicine* in 2007 found physicians from nonmetro hometowns 4.7 times as likely to locate their practices in a nonmetro location when compared to their peers from metropolitan areas.

And, for some, recruiters say the desire to be close to aging parents is a factor.

“We do use a hometown connection to recruit physicians when possible, although it doesn’t always produce results,” said Kris Andrews, a physician recruiter for BayCare Medical Group.

“Sometimes, physicians do want to go back to where they grew up to help the community that they love, and then there are those that want to venture out and find a new path.”

Pilkington went to Florida State University College of Medicine after undergraduate studies at the University of Florida. He left the state for a surgical internship and a urology residency at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center. He’s now at 407 S. 11th St.

Shepard got her medical degree at Ross University Medical School in Dominica, now Barbados, after undergraduate studies at the University of South Florida. Her residency was at University of Mississippi Medical Center.

She received scholarship help from the J.A. Wiltshire Foundation in Lake Wales and Take Stock in Children, a countywide program, which further deepened her ties to the community.

“It’s been a big deal (to me) to reach out to my community and help them heal,” said Shepard, whose office is at 1255 State Road 60 E., Suite 500.

Prevailing wisdom says doctors are more inclined to set up practices in areas where they did residencies or other advanced medical training.

Legislators told FSU’s medical school to focus on primary care doctors and encourage them to practice within the state.

That takes residency programs, which AdventHealth has in Central Florida, although not in Polk.

Winter Haven Hospital, BayCare Medical Group and FSU, however, are creating one in Winter Haven. WHH is part of the BayCare Health system.

Doctors are scheduled to start residencies in Winter Haven in July. The city already is benefitting from a Family Health Center at 1201 First St., S, Suite 100A.

Three primary care doctors, who will be faculty in the residency program, treat patients there now Wellness visits, sports medicine, osteopathic manipulative treatment, women's health care and treatment of sprains, strains and arthritis are among its services.

Residents will join them in treating patients there. Some, it's hoped, will like Polk enough to stay permanently.

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