



Cardiologist enjoys rural practice



If Lincoln County's visiting cardiologist seems more than comfortable, it's because he understands life in a rural farm town.

"I speak the language," laughs Dr. Stephen Thew, who sees patients at the Davenport Clinic each week.

A native of Scribner, Nebraska (pop. 1,000 on a really good year), Dr. Thew grew up bucking bales, rounding up cattle and cleaning out his share of pig pens and chicken coops. It all prepared him for his future career.

"Of course, every kid in Nebraska thinks they're going to grow up and play football for the Huskers. I know I did. When I realized college football just wasn't going to work out, medicine made sense. There are a number of physicians in my family and it's a great job. You really get to know people in a context of trust. They rely on you. It's an honor to have people trust in your decisions."

Trust. Reliability. Honor. These attributes not only make rural America great — they make great doctors. Especially doctors willing to travel 40 miles to see their patients.

"I enjoy the drive," says Dr. Thew, who was hand-picked by Dr. Bill Stifter to take over his Davenport practice before his untimely death in a plane crash this spring. "It makes more sense for me to drive 40 miles to see 15 patients than to have those same 15 patients come to Spokane to see me."

Besides, the people here are just like back home.

"They're down to earth and don't have a lot of complaints (aka: not high maintenance). Most of them apologize for imposing or taking my time, which they're not. I'm here for them."

Mechanically inclined, Dr. Thew says he became attracted to cardiology in a high school advanced biology class.

"The heart fascinated me. The way it worked just made sense — it's a pump with valves that moves blood. Although it sounds simple, it's not. I still find it amazing that it knows to go on its own. It speeds up and slows down and it doesn't get tired. You can't raise your arm all day and not feel tired or sore, but the heart can pump for 100 years."

If yours runs into trouble before that century mark, Dr. Thew is the go-to guy. An interventional cardiologist, his main goal is to keep patients from having a heart attack.

"Prevention is the best treatment of all," he says. "Getting your numbers and working to keep blood pressure and cholesterol low is very important." And when that can't be done, Dr. Thew is still the man.

Part of Sacred Heart's cardiac catheterization team, he'll likely be present when Lincoln County folks are flown in by MedStar helicopter as part of the Level One Cardiac Care program.

"Level One is fantastic! It's a great idea that will save lives," he says. "It's a necessity to get people in quickly. The more heart muscle we save, the better the outcome for the patient."

Not only does he like the program, but he sees great value in building relationships with the rural doctors on the front lines.

"Not only is there a lot of coordination between facilities with Level One, there's a great deal of trust between physicians. We have to trust the judgment of the rural doctor reading that EKG, and he has to trust that we'll be there in a timely fashion and do the appropriate treatment for his patient."

And the more they work together, the better that relationship gets.

"This program is working. It's saving lives and making a difference in how well people live — their quality of life after a heart attack is much improved with quick intervention." And now that he's seeing clinic patients in Davenport, he'll get the opportunity to follow up with many Level One patients for years to come.

"It's exhilarating to fix an immediate problem like a blockage, but now I can follow up after a procedure and, over the years, help these patients to keep their cholesterol and blood pressure down to prevent future events."