

**Michael F. Shank, DO**  
*Bringing Health Care to the Elderly—  
Wherever They Need It*



Many of today's health news headlines point to a looming shortage of primary care physicians, particularly those trained to care for the elderly. Perhaps what the world needs now is more physicians like Michael Shank, DO, of Rose Tree Medical Associates, who was drawn to senior care three decades ago as a student at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM).

"Right away, I found people who are elderly to be such interesting, complex patients," Dr. Shank recalls. "Often, just a few small changes here and there—such as an adjustment in medication or a new therapy—would make a vast difference in the quality of their lives."

Those early experiences in problem-solving inspired Dr. Shank to build a career in geriatrics. He was also motivated by the example of a family doctor from his childhood who made house calls to his Newtown Square home. That model of primary care, in which a physician commits to seeing patients in any setting, appealed to him and seemed to be just what older patients and their families needed most.

After graduating from PCOM, Dr. Shank began teaching anatomy to first-year medical students—a role he continues today—and supervising their internships and residencies. He also started caring for older patients in their homes, at nursing homes, and at Riddle Hospital when they needed inpatient care.

"At first I literally was carting around medical records and working out of the trunk of my car," he recalls.

Before long he gained a partner and some office space, and over the years Rose Tree Medical Associates has grown into a practice of 13 physicians based at Riddle in Health Center 3. The core philosophy remains the same: follow patients wherever they are, and give them the continuity of care that can only come from a primary care physician who knows them well.

"It is especially important for older patients and families to establish the rapport with a physician who will follow them throughout the continuum of care," Dr. Shank says. "We do not rush our patients. They often have complicated medical situations with multiple problems that need to be addressed.

"To simply tell a patient, 'Well, you're old,' just doesn't feel right to me. If someone is having a health issue, we need to work together to fix it."

Dr. Shank continues to take his practice on the road by seeing patients at White Horse Village in Newtown Square, where he is medical director; at other nursing homes; and in their private residences. He works seven days a week and concentrates his house calls—an estimated 10 to 20 per week—on the weekends. It's a rigorous schedule, but one that allows him to be the kind of doctor he always wanted to be. As fewer young physicians choose primary care and geriatrics, he remains more committed than ever to forging long-term relationships with patients and their families to help them live well into old age—and that includes end-of-life care.

"We also must bring our efforts to giving patients a peaceful passing when the time comes," he says. "Care given without a clear purpose can be torture. It is important to help patients and families recognize when treatment of symptoms is no longer the answer and hospice care is the appropriate course of action."

Recently, two of Dr. Shank's long-term patients, Janet Fullmore and Nancy Most, made significant bequests to Riddle upon their passing—a testimony to the power of the relationship that binds patient, physician, and hospital. Dr. Shank says he feels fortunate that he and his patients have access to all of the resources available at Riddle, from diagnostic testing to excellent inpatient and specialty care.

"Having Riddle as my hospital makes me a better physician," he says. "This is a great community with a great commitment to the future."

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