

FEATURE

2000 Maryland Family Doctor of the Year

Ritchie C. Shoemaker, M.D.

by Marion Friedman, M.D.

(photo #5, caption: *Dr. Shoemaker*)

A more deserving selection than Ritchie C. Shoemaker, M.D. for this year's Maryland Family Doctor of the Year, this writer cannot imagine. He possesses, along with a most unusual background and training, an inquiring mind, a love of people and the outdoors. His unrelenting drive to press his viewpoint against any odds, when he is convinced that he is right, makes him all the more worthy of the award.

Let us start at the beginning. Ritchie was born in Charlotte, NC in 1951, the third of three children. His father had been born in New Jersey and his mother was a "Southern belle". They met in 1941 while students at Cornell University. His Dad became a chemical engineer and his job with Johnson and Johnson required the family to move from Massachusetts to New Jersey to Illinois and finally to Pennsylvania. During this period and for a total of 30 years after she was married, his mother taught first grade. With some rightful pride Ritchie points out that "the Shoemakers came from the Bradfords of Plymouth Rock notoriety" and his mother "from a long line of Southern tradition."

Dr. Shoemaker's older brother is a physician, having graduated from Stanford Medical School. His older sister, since graduating from the University of Southern California (USC), teaches music in Mexico. Ritchie's wife, JoAnn, has her masters in early childhood education and teaches pre-K in Worcester County. Their daughter and only child, 16-year old Sally, is already an award-winning and accomplished photographer. Also a gifted musician, playing the piano, clarinet and oboe, as well as singing in the church choir, she tends to three horses at home.

Since his mother, father and paternal grandfather were all graduates of Cornell, this would have been the direction envisioned for Ritchie. However he preferred Duke, a dream he had entertained since age 12. Dr. Shoemaker worked his way through that institution graduating *magna cum laude* in molecular biology. He worked with some teachers of note but, even then, stood by his convictions when he disagreed with them. One such difference occurred in his junior year while he was taking a graduate course in comparative cellular physiology. The professor awarded him only a C+ which, according to Ritchie, cost him a *Phi Beta Kappa* key. Even this he regards as a great learning experience since he worked with leaders in the field of cell physiology. Our Family Doctor of the Year decided, however, that there was more to life for him than a molecular biology lab. He points out that he was also fortunate enough to have worked with several role models at Duke and was especially impressed by a renown surgeon, Dr. David Sabiston, who authored "Sabiston's Textbook of Surgery."

In 1971 he worked with several other undergraduate and medical students from Duke to set up a free medical clinic in downtown Durham. He says, "The difference between the research labs and electronic microscopes compared to

the poverty and the roaches and the diet and the diabetes and the hypertension pointed me to primary care.” He asks, “Can one year of volunteerism change a life?” And answers, “I think it changed mine for the better.”

During his third year at medical school he initiated *First Content*, a primary care, medical student journal in which he hoped to focus on “the issues and concepts fundamental to primary care that weren’t being addressed by the super-specialists at Duke.” He also notes that with this he had the chance to meet the early giants of the Family Practice movement.

After a residency in family medicine at Williamsport (PA) Hospital, Ritchie in 1981 settled into a career in rural family practice in Pocomoke City, Maryland. He considered it an idyllic site “with good crab meat readily available.” From the start he designed his solo practice to be different from that of others. The patient flow was separated from that of the staff with extra examining rooms and a small waiting room. His first sign read, “If you have been waiting more than 20 minutes, ask the receptionist for an explanation.” He also noted that with the nearest hospital being over 30 minutes away, his office had to plan to provide a comprehensive array of services, including home calls.

Dr. Shoemaker has always been actively involved in his community. He formed a small restoration company that saved and rebuilt *Election House*, a structure originally built in 1812 in Princess Anne and then used as a town hall. In 1984 he spent \$30,000.00 of his own funds to restore it and then donated it to the community. Later when a clam steaming operation moved next to their *Learning Station* and began fouling up the air with the smell of many days-old water emanating from their open air vats, he was instrumental in starting a group known as *PU* (Public United). With no cooperation or assistance from State government, the group also learned on its own that the clam boats were also smuggling marijuana. They informed the FBI who finally closed the clam plant down. The vacated building was eventually renovated by the group and converted it into a day care center.

(photo #6, caption: *Dr. Shoemaker receives 1997 Volunteer Award from Gov. Glendening and Lt. Governor Townsend*)

The Shoemakers later moved into its present home on 15 acres in Pocomoke. They have planted thousand of trees and bulbs, built 3 ponds, turned rush grass meadows into orchards and pastures and worked with the *Pocomoke River Alliance* in numerous wetland projects.

The most well known controversy Ritchie has had to address has been the recent pfiesteria outbreak that developed in his area in the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He happened to be the right person in the right place at the right time -- a physician with an unusual amount of training in biology and cellular physiology, an imaginative mind, a love of the outdoors and ecology and an intense interest in research.

To avoid damage to the tourist and fishing industries of the area, the politicians and health appointees under their control actually attempted to deny the existence of a problem. They “studied” the evidence and concluded that boat scrapings and other mechanical causes produced the lesions on the fish. Dr. Shoemaker was actually denied entrance to meetings and not allowed to present his views. One state official described him as a “kook” and a “fear monger.” A scientist with the Maryland Department of the Environment suggested that he be charged with “scientific malpractice.” Only when he made his conclusions known to the news media, did his findings receive consideration. Dr. Shoemaker has

published a book of his experiences in this problem entitled "Pfiesteria: Crossing Dark Water." It is an eye opening account of the effect of politics on health and medicine.

His studies involving basic cell physiology and the mechanisms of actions of biologic toxins has propelled him into some interesting viewpoints on obesity, the chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic soft tissue injury and other ills of humanity. While his findings may or may not result in radical changes in our approach to these and other illnesses, they certainly merit serious investigation.

In honoring Dr. Shoemaker we honor ourselves, as his endless attributes reflect so favorably on family physicians and on the Maryland Academy in particular.

Editor's Note: This article went to press prior to the MAFP Annual Meeting 2000 where Dr. Shoemaker received his award. A review of the event will appear next edition.