

Healing Hands at Hilton Head

Jack McConnell had earned a leisurely retirement at luscious Hilton Head Island. Nearly four decades in medicine led him to a pediatric practice, the development of Tylenol tablets and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and to the cofounding of a group that mapped the human genetic structure.

But as he drove by the sun-kissed South Carolina waters, his conscience shuddered at the dark, impoverished lives of many islanders. "I would ask them where they got their medical care," he says. "Invariably they said they didn't get it."

Poverty had thrived, too, in his native Crumpler, West Virginia, and in Kingsport, Tennessee, where he spent school-age years. His father was a minister, his mother a teacher. Young Jack and his seven siblings learned early the creed of caring. "We used to sit at the dinner table and ask, 'What did you do for someone today?'" he recalls.

Now 71, with compassionate green eyes and radiant energy, this deeply spiritual man of science once again felt called to help his neighbors by creating a free health clinic. His golf game rusted from a 16 to a 26 handicap, and his "leisure time" whirled into 60- to 80-hour unpaid work weeks.

Local retired doctors agreed to help—if Dr. McConnell guaranteed them malpractice protection and a waiver of the South Carolina licensing fee and exam. The state's Good Samaritan law gave protection from malpractice liability to doctors in an emergency or volunteer situation. Then Dr. McConnell shepherded through a state law that awarded a

volunteer license for the doctors.

In 1994 the 7,000-square-foot Volunteers in Medicine Clinic opened without a dime of federal, state, or local money. It now boasts some 40 physicians, 14 dentists, 65 nurses, and countless nonmedical volunteers. "We're the only town in the nation that can declare that every



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLEN BOKACH

person who lives or works here has an easy access to health care," he says. "We achieved it using two elements of society that have been rendered invisible and excluded: the poor and the retirees."

He bristles at the suggestion that older doctors may not be up to par, citing weekly education sessions and hospital peer review.

Each week about 250 patients—he calls them "friends and neighbors"—arrive. In the reception area, donors are listed, but contribution amounts aren't posted. All are equally honored, from the waitress's \$10 gift to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's \$350,000.

Dr. McConnell recalls the mother who plopped her 3-year-old boy on the counter. The child carefully extended a wadded couple of bills. "She said, 'We were going shopping, and he said, 'Let's give my

money to the clinic,'" Dr. McConnell says, genuinely moved.

The clinic's humanitarian philosophy shines in today's cut-corners-at-all-costs managed medicine. "We used to have a culture of caring, where we truly cared for patients in addition to their diseases," he says. He adds that most hospitalizations

occur because of lifestyle, not illness or disease. Poverty takes its toll, and doctors should look at patients holistically.

For example, when patient Peggy Jones had no ride from the clinic, Dr. McConnell drove her home—and made a friend. Today Peggy drops by just to tell "Dr. Mac" about her plans to save money for a computer. He listens, then asks an assistant, "What are we doing with those computers in the back?"

"They're yours," comes the reply. He turns back to Peggy. "You want one?" She answers with a shriek.

Some 500 cities in 49 states have requested help in starting similar clinics. He plans a video on their "culture of caring." "We have all the resources that we need to give health care to every person in the United States," he declares. Retired health professionals would treat the needy if malpractice and licensing obstacles were overcome. As it is, 40 million Americans suffer.

Dr. McConnell recites the clinic's vision statement like a prayer: "May we have eyes to see those who are rendered invisible and excluded, open arms and hearts to reach out and include them, healing hands to touch their lives with love, and in the process heal ourselves." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*