

Surgeon doesn't even own a lab coat

Brett Schulte says doctors just plain everyday people

By Howard Huntington
of the Daily Courier

The miracle never escapes Brett Schulte. "You can literally cut someone open from stem to stern, side to side, disarticulate things, sew it all back together and the body will heal that." As a general surgeon at Three Rivers Community Hospital, the 47-year-old Schulte witnesses it all the time.



SCHULTE

But he doesn't believe doctors are special. "I think a long, long time ago, probably before I even started training, physicians were held in perhaps a little bit more awe than they are today.

"Most of my colleagues, most of the people I trained with, were just plain old everyday people," he says. "They just happened to have a calling to go into medicine."

Schulte swears he doesn't even own a white lab coat, and only in the movies do doctors walk around all day with stethoscopes around their necks.

Schulte was born in Mount Clemens, Mich., and grew up in San Diego.

He was the first physician in his family, receiving his medical degree from the University of Washington in Seattle and doing his residency at St. Joseph Hospital in Denver.

He was a "bit of a recluse" and intimidated by all the people coming at him. Today, he prides himself on spending a lot of time helping patients understand their conditions and how he's going to treat them. "It's the reason why I'm usually an hour late for all my appointments."

The public also needs to understand something: General surgeons do not work on all parts of the body — they work on *more* parts than specialists do, and that is, or was, the fun for Schulte. "Urologists are stuck with the urinary system. OBGYN is stuck with babies and the uterus."

Dismayed by the rain in Seattle and the exploding population of San Diego, he arrived in Grants Pass 12 years ago. Three Rivers was operating out of two aging hospital facilities across town from each other.

Schulte says the new \$52 million hospital that opened in 2001 is infinitely superior, as well equipped as any place he has worked.



Brian Prechtel Photo

Dr. Brett Schulte, left, and Dr. Tammy Washut perform surgery at Three Rivers Community Hospital.

He also praises the improvements in streets, sidewalks and storefronts downtown since he moved here, but says the city has overdeveloped the once beautiful and pastoral Redwood area into "what looks like a typical suburb of Southern California."

He's not feeling much better about more specialist surgeons coming in, taking away some of the variety he enjoyed in his cases.

But his workload keeps growing as the population gets bigger and older. Schulte speaks of the physical demands — particularly emergen-

cies in the middle of the night, and the time he can't spend with his wife and two children.

The population of general surgeons is also graying. Schulte says four are over 60 and should retire, but they know the community needs them.

No new general surgeon has been hired in more than four years, he says.

They need help from Three Rivers, but the hospital is suffering in this economy, and it's tough to recruit doctors coming out of school because they need bigger salaries to pay off their student loans and other debts, he says.

"If a job is fun, you'll work it until you die," Schulte muses. But if he continues averaging 80 hours a week, he wonders how many good years he has left.

Surgeons Tammy Washut and Mary Sorensen are putting in the same kind of time training for a year at Three Rivers Hospital, but say they've had it worse. Both earned their medical degrees at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland.

Three Rivers is but one stop in their residencies at OHSU-connected hospitals. Washut wants to rebuild faces, but that would require more training than general surgery. She might also have to live in a big city, "and I have not quite decided if that's what I want to do." Washut is from Casper, Wyo., with a population of around 50,000.

She wants to stay out West and says OSHU has one of the few programs in the country to get surgeons back into rural areas. She notes the Rogue Valley's scenic beauty and community support, and adds that Three Rivers has been "fabulous. I actually don't want to leave."

Though Schulte feels crowded by a growing number of specialists, Washut believes rural areas promise general surgeons a more diverse caseload than the big city does. But salaries here are "going way down. They have to work a lot harder to make their money," she says. "It's really kind of sad."

"I think it's the way of medicine these days, and I don't think the community knows surgeons just aren't getting paid what they used to."

"I really love the OR staff" at Three Rivers, Sorensen says. "It's a little bit of a small town for me."

She's from even smaller Columbia Falls, Mont., but has lived in Portland for many years.

For Sorensen, one of the biggest priorities in launching a regular practice will be finding co-workers she can rely on for support and help with tough cases.



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