

Recruiting plays important role in Mile Bluff's success

by Larry Arnold

Over the years Mile Bluff Medical Center has come to be recognized as one of the best small-town medical centers in the Midwest. Mile Bluff's vigorous and ongoing recruiting practices have played an important part in that success.

Many young physicians are not interested in practicing in rural areas. A new educational program (WARM) at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health is designed to address this problem by training medical students for rural practices.

While such programs may be of help, Mile Bluff Medical Center for many years has done a good job of recruiting physicians. The medical staff as of the end of March of 2008 included 17 family practice physicians (one of whom is an internist, and three who specialize in geriatric medicine), one pathologist, three general surgeons, two podiatrists, three gynecologists, two nurse practitioners, and 15 physician assistants.

The original surge in growth dates back to the days of Project '80, when the community raised a million dollars (a lot of money in those days) toward a new hospital. A pre-requisite to building a new hospital at that time, was a "Certificate of Need" which included evidence that there was a sufficient number of physicians on the staff to utilize the new facility.

Over the years, the talent and dedication of community hospital board members and hospital administrators has helped recruit physicians. Ron DeGolier, who was the administrator at the start of Project '80 helped with the fund raising for the new facility and recruiting of doctors to practice in the new hospital and clinic.

When DeGolier left because of health problems, then financial officer Dan Manders took over and did a masterful job of directing the hospital through the dynamic expansion of the hospital until he retired in 2005. When Jim O'Keefe succeeded Manders, it quickly became evident that Mile Bluff Medical Center was

in good hands and would continue to grow and prosper.

Nancy Ness, MD recalls the three-doctor staff when the Project '80 recruiting effort began. The doctors were Dr. Jack Strong, Dr.



Dr. Nancy Ness

Vernon Griffin and Dr. Rey Farne. Dr. Nancy Ness and her husband, Dr. Keith Ness, were in residency at Eau Claire at the time, and were contacted to see whether they would be interested in practicing here.

"We were favorably impressed and signed a letter of intent to practice in Mauston," Mile Bluff's Medical Director Nancy Ness said. At that time Dr. Keith Ness was appointed to the building committee. "It was a pretty hectic time," Dr. Nancy commented.

A decision was made at that time that the doctors would provide the finances to build a new clinic building adjacent to the new hospital. Dr. Nancy recalled, "Those were the days of 16 percent interest; we really had to scrape to come up with the money."

As soon as the buildings were finished, it became evident that more doctors would be needed.

"One day Leon Radant and his wife Margy Miller (a physical therapist) drove into town and liked what they saw, so he agreed to join the staff. Six months later, Dr. Radant's friend Dr. Eric Heaney joined the staff with his wife Cathy Murphy (a nurse practitioner), and shortly there-

after, Jim Logan and his wife Dawn (an occupational therapist) drove through Mauston en route to Tomah to visit family. They looked the new facility over and quickly agreed to come on board," Dr. Ness recalled.

She added: "All of a sudden we had a team of young colleagues that were fired up and enthusiastic; it was really awesome; they were the first wave of successful recruiting."

The second big wave recruited family practice physicians David and Ann Hoffmann, Tim Bjelland and Carol Stodola, and podiatrist Rick Langen.

The third big wave was in 2002, when five physicians and two physician assistants joined the staff. The doctors were Kevin Coleman, DO, Chris Eckerman, DPM, Dan Kattenbraker, MD, June Lewandoski, MD, and Jane Peterson-Kattenbraker, MD. The physician assistants were William Byers, PA-C, and Jeremi Olson, PA-C.

A significant increase in the volume of surgeries performed at Mile Bluff made it necessary to build a new surgery wing, which was opened in 2001. It also made an expansion of the surgical staff a priority. After long-time Mile Bluff surgeon Rey Farne retired, general surgeons William Marculis and Tim Napier joined the staff in 1997 and 1998. A third general surgeon, Dr. Rodney Malinowski, became a staff member in November of 2007.

The latest addition to the surgical staff is Dr. Robert Riedle, an orthopedic surgeon, who will join the medical staff in July. He will be interviewed for a story that will appear in our August edition.

Mile Bluff has long recognized that medical institutions have a responsibility to help students acquire the knowledge that allows them to become healthcare professionals. As of the end of March there were 40 students studying at Mile Bluff, including: audiology students, bachelor of science nursing students, physician assistant student, a fourth-year medical student, 20 certified nursing assistant students, 15 associate degree nursing students, and an occupational therapy student.

In summing up what has been done in the ongoing recruiting of physicians for Mile Bluff, Dr. Ness said: "Over the last 30 years, our number of practitioners has grown at the rate of seven percent per year."

Mile Bluff Medical Center also played an important part in recent efforts to resolve the shortage of nurses in this area. Vice President Carol Purvis worked closely with officials of Western Technical College (WTC), and their joint efforts resulted in a 7,500 square-foot healthcare wing at the Mauston campus of WTC. A number of students who studied at WTC are presently on the nursing staff at Mile Bluff Medical Center.

Educational efforts at Mile Bluff have also had a positive effect on recruiting. At present time, Dr. June Lewandoski who did her residency in Mauston, Dr. Kim Sabey who completed a surgical rotation, and several physician assistants who did some of their studies at Mile Bluff have all become staff members.

While some students prefer the advantages of a big city, many of them recognize that Mile Bluff and central Wisconsin have a lot to offer. Technology at Mile Bluff compares very favorably with major medical centers. For instance, complete im-

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aging services including: mammography, X-ray, bone densitometry, ultrasound, echocardiography, nuclear medicine, computerized axial tomography (CT Scan), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and positron emission tomography.

Other assets to attract prospective personnel include good schools, lakes and rivers which provide excellent fishing, good deer and turkey hunting, nearby bike paths, and beautiful scenery.

With the continued enthusiasm of the community and all the practitioners involved, the waves of recruiting will no doubt continue.