

TUCSON GIVING

PROFILE: Brock Bakewell (St. Elizabeth's Health Center)

Tucson blessed with altruistic doctors

By Loni Nannini

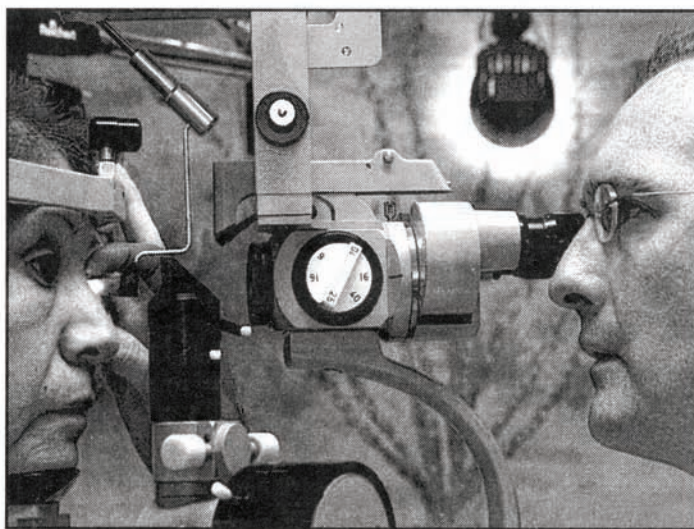
SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Brock Bakewell, a local ophthalmologist, is one of more than 150 physicians, dentists, dental hygienists and nurses who provided more than \$750,000 worth of in-kind services to patients from St. Elizabeth's Health Center last year.

For Bakewell, giving back is all about setting aside the practice-related business and financial concerns that plague physicians and getting back to his medical roots. Volunteering his time and skills to give St. Elizabeth's patients eye exams to screen for retinal disease, cataracts, complications of diabetes and other conditions and donating his professional fees for cataract and refractive surgeries and corneal transplants are opportunities to do that.

"We can't lose sight of why we became physicians," said Bakewell, who has practiced in Tucson since 1989 and began volunteering at St. Elizabeth's shortly thereafter. "Even though we have high malpractice premiums and need liability reform, and Medicare keeps cutting our fees, this is something where I don't worry about being paid. I am just practicing my specialty and helping people. It is important to keep in mind why we went into medicine and to give something back to the community."

He is part of a network of specialists — cardiologists, neurologists, oncologists, radiologists, urologists and more — and general practitioners who donate skills and resources to underserved patients who would otherwise fall through the cracks.



JAMES S. WOOD / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Ophthalmologist Brock Bakewell, right, gives an eye exam to Bertha Valenzuela while volunteering at St. Elizabeth's Health Center. "We can't lose sight of why we became physicians," says Bakewell.

Professionals provide care and medical procedures not only at St. Elizabeth's, but through their own offices, surgery centers and area hospitals, yet Bakewell said their generosity goes largely unrecognized.

"The whole reason the entire medical system hasn't fallen apart to begin with is because of the sheer altruism of all physicians ... and (physicians) don't get kudos, but just keep doing what they do, which is to take care of people despite the fact that their pocketbooks are hurt," he said. "They still find a way to take care of patients."

Providing regular and preventive care for those who can't afford private insurance but are unable to qualify for government-funded health-care assistance programs has been St. Elizabeth's mission since 1961.

The center currently serves about 19,000 patients on a sliding-fee scale based on family income and size of household.

"The founders thought they would need to be open for only 10 years and by that time everyone would have health insurance," said Nancy Johnson, executive director of St. Elizabeth's. "But 45 years later, the problem has escalated."

Johnson said the diverse patient population is 50 percent Hispanic and ranges from University of Arizona students and employees of small businesses to spouses and families of those whose employers offer employee insurance coverage but are unable to afford family coverage. The center is intended for residents: photo identification and proof of Arizona address and income are required.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Una Noche de Alegria

When: 5:30 p.m. Nov. 4.

Where: Hotel Arizona, 181 W. Broadway.

Cost: \$120 per person.

Festivities of "A Joyful Night" will be led by master of ceremonies Richard Carmona, 17th surgeon general of the United States. The 45th-anniversary celebration for St. Elizabeth's Health Center will include special appreciation of volunteers and partners. All proceeds benefit St. Elizabeth's. For tickets or more information, call 623-0344, Ext. 1047.

"We see some refugees, but more and more we might be seeing your neighbor," Johnson said.

The center's volunteer network has become a national model, according to Johnson, who credits the success to the "amazing character and commitment" of local health-care professionals.

"Many of our volunteers have volunteered for years and years," she said. "It is something that is just part of our community, and these professionals have really nurtured it. Physicians and dentists recruit their colleagues and recruit amongst themselves. It is an incredible system that allows us to keep health care affordable for our patients."

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