

*Ukiah Valley
Medical Center*



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: March 21, 2006

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It's Relationships, Not Rocket Science

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to become a doctor but that's just what Dr. Gregory Esselman did before he began his career as a surgeon. He was an aerospace engineer.

"Engineering itself was too theoretical, not hands-on enough," said Esselman. "I wanted to be in surgery. My engineering skill lended itself to that."

"I wanted to be a people engineer not a rocket engineer."

When Dr. Esselman finished his medical training in St. Louis, he could have gone anywhere in the world to practice. Instead of just anywhere though, he chose Ukiah.

"It's a unique opportunity," said Dr. Esselman. "Doctors can go just about anywhere. But this community had a need and [my wife and I] seemed like a good fit."

Dr. Esselman, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist), joined the medical staff at Ukiah Valley Medical Center (UVMC) six years ago. Since then, he has begun a quest to bring cutting-edge training right here to Ukiah.

"For six years, I have been practicing what I learned from residency. In any profession, to remain on top of what you do, you need exposure to the cutting edge," said Esselman.

So, Dr. Esselman sought out Stanford University.

"I wanted to be involved with Stanford," Esselman said. "They are a center of excellence in my specialty and I want to help create a connection between their center and ours."

In August of 2005, Dr. Esselman was appointed Adjunctive Clinical Faculty in the Otolaryngology Department at Stanford University. He travels to Stanford once a month to teach medical residents but also to consult on his most difficult cases from Ukiah.

“The people of Ukiah live here because they want to, because it’s a nice place to be. But there’s a perception that if you live here, you have to go elsewhere for your goods and services,” said Esselman. “We need to change that perception.”

“The challenge we [physicians] face in this town is to guarantee, to the best of our ability, that patients can get the best care right here,” said Esselman. “My work with Stanford enables a tradeoff: I drive to the Bay Area so my patients don’t have to.”

“In medicine there’s a certain level of infrastructure necessary to provide the highest level of care. The best way to achieve that in a small town is to establish a relationship with an excellent larger facility,” said Esselman. “You need to have a connection.”

Other physicians have made those connections as well. “Our doctors work with and learn from colleagues at California Pacific Medical Center, Stanford, UC Davis and UC San Francisco,” said Esselman.

According to UVMC general surgeon Dr. Larry Falk, “Dr. Hugh Curtis started this idea 30 years ago. He would go down to San Francisco, meet doctors preeminent in their field and then bring them up to Ukiah to train our docs.” Dr. Falk has continued to nurture and build on those relationships and brings physicians up to Ukiah even today.

“Relationships and collaboration with bigger medical centers is the future,” said Falk. “They can train us and consult on difficult surgeries. I have consulted from the operating room with colleagues from Stanford. It’s encouraging to know there is a reservoir of professionalism available.”

“The days of being completely on your own are over,” Falk said. “I see the future as collaboration so that our patients can have the best resources in the world, available here at home.”

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ATTENTION MEDIA: Photos available upon request.

Ukiah Valley Medical Center is part of Adventist Health, a not-for-profit, faith-based health system operating in California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington. Founded on the Seventh-day Adventist heritage of Christian health care, Adventist Health is comprised of 20 hospitals with more than 3,100 beds, 18,800 employees, numerous clinics and outpatient facilities, 16 home care agencies and three joint-venture retirement centers. For more information, visit www.uvmc.org or www.adventisthealth.org.