

Nothing Bone Dry In Tucson

Running an Arizona bone clinic, Dr. Michael Maricic doesn't find any day easy—or without its rewards

For Michael Maricic, MD, the heat is always on—and that's not just from the scalding temperatures of the ever present Tucson sun. Strolling through the lobby of his bone clinic, that same sign awaits every morning: "Our mission is to provide compassion and high quality rheumatic care." Compassion is first in that sentence and in his mind, and Dr. Maricic is desperately hoping it will make him and his partners the leader in a competitive game: after all, this is Arizona, a place where the elderly go to retire and often take rheumatism with them.

Many rheumatologists may think they've seen it all, but Dr. Maricic constantly reminds himself to take a fresh perspective to every patient. "Even if I'm able to immediately diagnose the problem, you also have to diagnose the patient's attitude. I've seen patients with the exact same issues and yet one is walking around with energy while another feels they're in constant pain. I have to give one a lot more support than the other." But for one recent patient, it was rather difficult for her to have a good attitude because the diagnosis had been long overdue "There was an elderly woman who had syncope," he recalls. "She went to the cardiologist then the neurologist. When it got to me, she had a sedimentation rate that was high and I didn't think it was a rheumatic condition. The patient had a CAT scan on her chest because they first thought she was having pulmonary emboli. The radiologist saw her aorta was swollen and an artery biopsy test was done revealing temporalitis. But this usually makes headaches and loss of vision, not passing out. In medicine, there's a saying that common things are common. When we think of temporalitis, we think of seizures. From now on, I'll also have to think of passing out."

Dr. Maricic, who studied medicine at University of Zagreb in Croatia, always starts his day with a mandatory cup of coffee—for the next 9 ½ hours will have little to no down time. "I see patients from 8-5:30 every day right through lunch," he says. "I also spend one half day per week in clinical research and two half days with medical students (from the University of Arizona). I'm going over internal medicine and rheumatology with them, but I'm making sure we get time in with patients, rather than lecture-driven. Students have to learn how to do with people. I also do consults during the week...I have to make myself available to hospitals as they need me."

Although he doesn't want a day to be business as usual, Dr. Maricic isn't immune to the fact that this *is* a business. "I have a strong interest in osteoporosis and bone disease and always have—can't do rheumatology without getting involved in metabolic bone disorder. You have to participate in that aspect of rheumatic care and 20-30% of referrals are for bone-related disorders. From an income standpoint it's a helpful part of our practice and we participate in osteoporosis clinical trials that helps to buffer some of the cuts in Medicare. Reimbursement of pharmaceutical pay better than Medicare, so, for a rheumatologist, clinical trials have many positives. Of course, it's not lucrative compared

to the past and reimbursement will go down further. The same payment of \$140 will go to \$92 and then to \$43 in the next three years. None of us got into this thing to get rich.”

As Dr. Maricic calls it a day, that same lobby sign underscoring compassion greets him on the way out. If he ever changed the message, though, it would probably include that other healing word: listen. Says Dr. Maricic: “I spoke to a woman not long ago who complimented me on the way I really heard her and thanked me for looking into her eyes as we talked.” Dr. Maricic pauses and the tone of his voice lowers, however slightly. “She didn’t get better from a pill, it was her attitude and because I dealt with her like a person and gave her hope that she could get better. When you stop having that interest in your patients, it’s time to do something else.”