

Profile

Dr. Scott Carstens

RSF physician directs Scripps medical team conducting 'whole person' exams for executives in a hurry

By Arthur Lightbourn

Dr. Scott Carstens is proud of his Germanic heritage and of his banker father who taught him this ditty: 'Good, better, best. Never let it rest, until your good is better and your better is best.'

He smiles when he recalls how that ditty still remains deeply imbedded in his memory and definitely has influenced his approach to life and his profession as a physician.

"I like to do things well," he says. "I don't do things half-heartedly."

We interviewed Carstens at Scripps Clinic Carmel Valley, where he specializes in a rheumatology and internal medicine. He is also medical director of Scripps Center for Executive Health situated in a spa-like setting on the campus of Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla and recognized by Forbes as one of the top executive health programs in the country.

"We're not the biggest," Carstens said, "but we're incredibly efficient...in a way that's also very time-efficient for the patient."

Carstens joined Scripps almost 30 years ago as an examining physician and has been medical director of the executive health center for the past 10 years.

Looking younger than his 59 years, Carstens is a handsome 6-foot-2, 185 pounds, with muted blond hair, indicative of his age and German and Scandinavian heritage.

During the interview, when our photographer arrived, Carstens politely paused, deftly manipulated a tie that blended well with his checkered shirt and slipped into a finely-tailored olive suit jacket. He's always been "a clothes guy," he admits, something he inherited from his grandfather who owned

haberdashery shops in Minneapolis where Carstens was born and raised.

Minutes later, back at his desk and having removed his jacket, we resumed our interview.

Carstens said he's a middle child in a family of four children.

Does being a middle child tell us something of your personality?

"No," he said, "more so would be, I'm definitely a Virgo. I'm a detail-oriented person."

A good trait for a physician?

Peering over his glasses, he said, "Yeah, I don't let things go very often."

Which is good, considering he and his multidisciplinary team of colleagues put six to eight executives daily through a comprehensive "1-day WholePerson Examination™", with super-streamlined efficiency to zero-in on any immediate or looming health problems and to provide a blueprint for

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ongoing preventive maintenance and continuous good health.

"They have a good snapshot of what their health is," he said, "and what concerns need to be addressed, oftentimes followed up by their regular physicians, because many of the patients come from out of area."

Here's how Carstens explains the procedure:

"The WholePerson exam involves an evaluation by a physician, a dermatologist, a cardiologist, a gastroenterologist, a treadmill study, a colonoscopy, and visits on site with psychologists,

nutritionists and exercise physiologists, all compactly scheduled so the patient is not running around from office to office. All the providers come in to where the patient is. And we have the ability to do imaging studies."

The tests are usually completed in the morning with the afternoon devoted to consultations.

"And usually the patients are provided with the test results the next day in person or by phone," he said.

The examinations have uncovered countless cases of previously unrecognized heart disease, which have triggered life-saving interventions; also significant numbers of cancers, including prostate and lung cancers.

"We see patients from all over the country and sometimes the world. We see people from Asia, South America, Mexico, and even from gas exploration companies in

Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada."

The tests and consultations cost approximately \$2,700 and are generally paid for by the executives or by their companies and occasionally by insurance.

Carstens agreed that it would be "nice" to be able to provide such a comprehensive, time-compact service to everyone wanting it, "but unfortunately the cost is such that it would probably be cost prohibitive for everyone to do."

However, he said, it does serve as an ideal for what can be done.

In addition to his work in executive health, Carstens also keeps busy with his Scripps Clinic practice in both rheumatology and internal medicine.

He likes the challenge of practicing in both specialties.

"I may see a heart failure patient or diabetic patient and the next minute I'll see someone with lupus or rheumatoid disease."

And, he tries to transfer what the efficiencies he has developed working with executive patients to the services he provides for his patients at Scripps Clinic.

"I know how good it can be," he said.

What gives him the greatest satisfaction in his work?

"Patients understanding how to help themselves. I sometimes use the term: 'I'm happy to conduct, but you've got to play the music.' It's not so much what I do; I can point out certain things, and sometimes rather sternly; but once they get it and they full understand, whether it be a medication issue or a lifestyle issue, or addressing psycho-social concerns, and they really take charge of themselves, and I see them flower and flourish, that really gives me a lot of satisfaction."

What bothers him the most, he said, is non-compliance. "When patients understand what they need to do, but don't do it. The conse-



Dr. Scott Carstens
Photo/Jon Clark

quences of that sometimes in certain disease states can be quite catastrophic. And that's troubling to me."

He and his Australian-born Danish wife, Vicki, have been married for 33 years and have two grown children. They met while both were students at St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

"We met and didn't see each other for five years. She went off to New Zealand where her parents had moved to and finished her university degree ...When I was a senior in medical school, I decided to go to New Zealand and check it out. We decided pretty soon after to get married and we were married in Copenhagen, Denmark."

Carstens earned his B.S. in chemistry, magna cum laude, from St. Olaf in 1972; his M.D. from the University of Minnesota Medical School, 1976; his internship and residency in internal medicine at Milwaukee County General Hospital, 1977, 1979; and a fellowship in rheumatology, Scripps Clinic, 1981.

Asked for his view of the current national debate on improving the health care in the United States, Carstens said:

"We actually have an extraordinarily progressive and national health program as it is: Medicare. And why we haven't used that as a template to promote change in the right way is beyond me."

"We have a payroll tax that people contribute to. Many Medicare programs are very substantive, very well thought out, accepted by providers, accepted by patients; it's fairly main-stream."

What gives him the greatest satisfaction in his work?

'Patients understanding how to help themselves. I sometimes use the term: 'I'm happy to conduct, but you've got to play the music.'

"Why we need to try to reinvent the wheel is beyond me. It would be very easy to use the national Medicare structure to tack on services for those who were in between jobs and needed insurance coverage or at least the accessibility of insurance coverage and portability of insurance."

"And that would eliminate many of the concerns regarding the denial of insurance because of a pre-existing condition, I mean, nobody is denied Medicare services because of a pre-existing illness."

"Insurance companies work with Medicare. Provider groups work with Medicare. Hospital organizations work with Medicare. Patients understand Medicare."

"To me, it would be so much smarter to use the Medicare platform to make changes which probably 90 percent of us could agree on."

Quick Facts

Name: Scott Carstens, M.D.

Distinction: A Scripps Clinic Carmel Valley physician, specializing in rheumatology and internal medicine, Dr. Carstens is also medical director of Scripps Center for Executive Health at the Scripps Memorial Hospital campus in La Jolla.

Resident of: Fairbanks Ranch since 1989

Born: Minneapolis, Minn.

Education: B.S. degree in chemistry, magna cum laude, St. Olaf College, 1972; M.D., University of Minnesota Medical School, 1976; internship and residency in internal medicine, Milwaukee County General Hospital, 1977, 1979; fellowship in rheumatology, Scripps Clinic, 1981.

Family: He and his Australian-born Danish wife, Vicki (nee Vollmond) have been married 33 years. They met while both were students at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. They have two children: Christopher Vollmond-Carstens, 27, an investment banker in New York, and daughter, Lise Vollmond-Carstens, 24, a Princeton graduate and Internet business executive, also in New York City.

Physical Regimen: Swims laps in his home pool.

Interests: Travel, photography, and German language study.

Favorite Film: "Breakfast at Tiffany's," 1961 film starring Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard.

Recent Reading: *In Lincoln's Hand: His Original Manuscript with Commentaries by Distinguished Americans*, by Harold Holzer and Joshua Wolf Shenk.

Life Philosophy: "I like to do things well. I don't do things half-heartedly."