

Clinic draws on 70-year history

Omak Clinic had its start with medical school buddies

By Sheila Corson
The Chronicle

OMAK — While Wenatchee Valley Medical Clinic celebrates 70 years, its Omak Clinic is celebrating 25 years and with a long history before it took that name.

The Omak Clinic was formed when Family Medical Center joined the

Wenatchee Valley Medical Clinic in 1985 after years of partnerships and referrals.

Family Medical started in 1959 with one doctor who recruited two college buddies to join him. All three are now retired and still live in the area.

Pres Bratrude went to the University of Illinois Medical School in Chicago in the 1950s.

He met Lyle Cowan and Jim Bone there, but all three started their practices by going separate ways.

Back then, just about everyone joined the military for a short stint, and Bratrude was no different.

He was in the Navy right out of school, but after a short time there, he headed straight for Omak, he said.

He opened his practice as a family doctor in 1959 at the age of 28.

He quickly recruited Cowan, who graduated two years after him.



Bratrude

“
The strides in medical care have been just awesome.”

Dr. Lyle Cowan

He had been practicing at Fairchild Air Force Base.

‘An eventful day’

Cowan said he remembers his first day — “an eventful day.”

He was called in to do anesthesia for an emergency surgery for the first time.

He was a family doctor, specializing in women’s health, at the age of 27.

But back then, things were very different.

It was normal for the doctors to take turns doing the anesthesia and the surgery.

Specialists didn’t exist in Omak.

Jim Bone, then 30, had been practicing in Spokane for a year after a couple years in the Navy.

He said he decided he wanted to move to a smaller community, and Cowan and Bratrude met with him at a convention in the city to talk him into coming.

He moved to Omak in 1962 and the three have been together ever since.

Things have changed greatly since then.

Bratrude said Thorazine, for the treatment of mental health patients, was brand new.

Breast cancer patients nearly always had mastectomies.

The average office visit cost \$5.

Now there really is no average cost because of all the specialists’ different charges, Bratrude said.

A hearse to the hospital

Cowan said when patients had to be transported to Wenatchee for surgery, they didn’t have an ambulance.

Patients were laid in the back of Precht-Harrison Chapel’s hearse.

He remembers several times being stretched out beside a patient in the hearse, trying to keep the person alive and pumping blood.

“The strides in medical care have been just awesome,” Cowan said.

Whether in medicines or techniques or testing, Cowan said the changes have meant better care.

More recent politics inserting themselves into the situation have made things more complicated.

Earlier on, a doctor could spend as much time as needed with a patient, but now the costs keep doctors running through patients quickly, Cowan said.



Cowan

Changes in insurance, costs and the amount of specialists have made things more complicated, Bratrude said.

To “keep us smart,” the clinic signed up with the WAMI program to teach medical school students on the job in the 1970s when it began, Bone said.

The clinic still participates in the program.

Following the hospital

When the hospital moved from its Ash Street location to Okoma Drive, the clinic followed, having been next door on Ash Street.

The convenience of visiting patients in the hospital and walking back and forth would have been missed too much, they said.

Increased complexity with the system led to the merger with Wenatchee Valley Medical Clinic in 1985, Bone said.

Having that administrative force to take on rules, regulations and insurance companies was needed.

There were six doctors on staff by that time.

Among the staff of the Family Medical Clinic was Debi Clark, who remembers going to the office in the 1960s as a child.

She said she best remembers the big fish tank they had.

She started working with the doctors in 1976 when they brought in the first computer, which took up an entire room and required its own air conditioning system.

When the clinic joined Wenatchee Valley, she became office manager.



Bone

She now manages the Omak Clinic.

Bone retired in 1994, Cowan in 1995 and Bratrude in 2000.

Bratrude said if a stroke at 70 hadn’t stopped him, he would still be practicing medicine.

A new building

Clark said the Omak Clinic built its new building just off U.S. Highway 97 in 1997, bringing more surgery, optical, physical therapy, bigger X-ray equipment and more into the mix.

Space more than doubled. The staff now includes 99 people, or 65-68 full-time equivalent positions.

That includes seven doctors, six mid-level practitioners and many nurses and physician’s assistants.

A new doctor will join in July and another is expected in the fall, Clark said.

Physical therapy has now been closed, but the clinic has plans for the area.

The Omak Clinic officially turns 25 on July 1. Meanwhile, Wenatchee Valley Medical Clinic is celebrating 70 years.

It was started by three doctors in 1940.

A party is planned July 17 in Wenatchee.

Bratrude said he expects that medicine will keep changing all the time, especially with electronic medical records, the rise in costs, specialization and universal health care.

“You can’t hardly look at a part of medicine without seeing big changes,” Bratrude said.



Clark