

PRIMARYLY VERMONT



A Newsletter Dedicated to Those Who Deliver & Teach Primary Care

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Robert Tortolani, MD - Physician, Preceptor, Adoptive Vermonter

Robert Tortolani was born and raised in Connecticut but when he did an internship at Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington, he remarked: "When I saw Vermont I really fell in love with it; the Vermont ethic and Vermonters, and the beauty of the state, all made me want to live here," he recalls. It was not a direct journey that he made up Route 5 from Connecticut to the Green Mountain State.

He graduated from Brown University with an undergraduate degree in biology, and earned his medical degree at the University of Rochester Medical School, where he says he was very much influenced by the bio-psycho-social model of medicine taught there. He came to believe in the interaction between the physical and emotional aspects of the body and was taught to put emphasis on observation and interviewing skills with his patients.

It was the Vietnam War era and he joined the Army because he knew he would probably be drafted.

After two months' training in tropical medicine, he served as a surgeon in an infantry battalion of the 1st Air Cavalry Division for eight months in Vietnam, where he was the primary care physician for 900 soldiers. He worked with 25 brave and competent medics. It was a situation he calls "a bit challenging and a growth

period." During his final four months of his tour in Vietnam, he worked with three other young physicians in a collecting company which was the casualty triage facility for a brigade-size unit for 3,000 soldiers in one of the First Cavalry's three brigades. He knows he is very lucky to have left Vietnam physically unharmed.

He spent the second year of his Army stint in Colorado Springs, during which time he married his wife Karen, an artist, who he met while in medical school. Dr. Tortolani became a resident in internal medicine and family practice at the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont and later worked in the Emergency department at Copley Hospital in Morrisville, VT as well. He and his wife went to Australia for several months, after which they returned



Robert Tortolani, MD

to Vermont where he resumed working in the Stowe Clinic run by Copley Hospital. Dr. Tortolani and another physician were looking around the state for a place to establish themselves in family medicine and they decided on Brattleboro: Dr. Tortolani was home at last.

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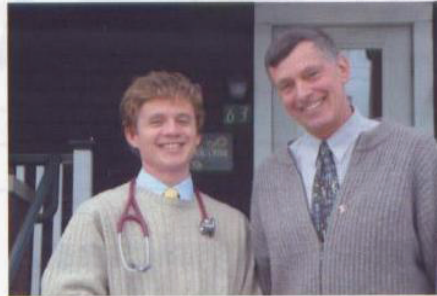
Family Practice Physician

He takes care of children through elderly people and enjoys all of it. "I love seeing children and seeing them grow," he notes and adds, "I've gotten interested in taking care of older patients so I got board certified in geriatrics." His philosophy on patient care? "In primary care, we try to work with the patient collaboratively: I like to use a collaborative approach." He was named Vermont Family Physician of the Year by the Vermont chapter of the American Academy of Family Physicians in 1991. And he is happy doing what he has chosen to do. "I'm in the right business," he admits, smiling.

He gives back to his profession in full measure. Currently, Dr. Tortolani is Windham County Councilor for the Vermont Medical Society, and he serves on the Southern Vermont Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Board. Of the latter, he says, "I agreed to do it because of my interest in primary care; I think the AHEC role is evolving. It's really playing an important role in the education of our young people in a rural state. The MedQuest summer camp is great, and it's fun to see the collaborative activities between AHEC and the various communities in its area."

Dr. Tortolani is concerned, however, about the plight of the primary care physician. "I think there are a lot of demands put on them, whether it's dealing with new treatment protocols, or concerns about the current study on side effects of estrogen replacement therapy; all the changing current topics are dealt with at the primary care level. There's a limit to what we can do. My biggest concern is the threat to the patient-doctor relationship: having the time to talk to the patient and still make a living."

He remarks that, "it is easy to get cynical or upset about the many life and death situations and emotional issues primary care physicians deal with; a lot of people get tired and each person must figure out how to keep balance in his life." Dr. Tortolani is one of seven physicians who get together once a month in a discussion facilitated by a psychologist, to discuss personal and professional issues they are dealing with. He is convinced it is important for caregivers to take care of themselves as well as others.



UVM medical student Jacob Lilly, left, with preceptor Robert Tortolani, M.D.

Preceptor

Dr. Tortolani is devoted to his role as a well-respected preceptor for residents and medical students. "I always liked teaching and with the advent of primary care training in medical schools, it became easier for students to come into your office," he notes.

"I work with first, second and third year residents in family practice as a preceptor and first, second, third, and fourth year medical students, so I'm very lucky because I work with students at every level," he says. He generally has two medical students a year who are "clerks" (one month each) from the University of Vermont College of Medicine; two participants in Dartmouth Medical School's "On Doctoring" program, and he spends one day each month teaching at the University of Massachusetts/Worcester program in Barre, Massachusetts, an assignment he has fulfilled for 13 years.

"The relationship with students continues to make the practice of medicine even more enjoyable," he comments thoughtfully. "Patients like to work with students and help to launch them as well; there's awareness at every level that medicine is a lot more than facts – it's a way you listen and working with students has to do with those subtleties and art."

Dr. Tortolani finds he learns from his students while he is teaching them. "There are some things that you take for granted and sometimes it just takes someone asking you, 'why is it done that way?' to cause you to reassess how you do things," he adds. He approaches students on an equal footing; when he is about to get a student to work with, he receives a personal profile of them, and he returns one of himself to the student, so the student can learn what besides medicine is important to him.

Asked for comments about Dr. Tortolani in his role as preceptor, UVM Clerkship Director David Little, M.D., responds with quotations from students who have completed a rotation with Dr. Tortolani:

- "He involved me in all aspects of his practice; made sure I had fun apart from learning, and assisted me to get to know Brattleboro as a community."
- "Completely committed to patient care and to the education of the assigned student. Very organized, disciplined, forthcoming and caring with respect to the entire hospital community – an outstanding role model. My nomination for clinical teacher of the year award."
- "He is a superb mentor and physician exemplifying the best aspects of a teacher and a doctor. It was a privilege to be able to work with him."

Adoptive Vermonter

Dr. Tortolani enjoys working in the Brattleboro area: "This is a great hospital for relationships; the doctors are pretty satisfied – most are in private practice. It's a very good place to practice medicine because of the hospital, the collegiality, and the doctors."

He also likes to be outside so he can hike, kayak, swim, canoe, walk, cross country ski and...play softball. Dr. Tortolani is in his 30th year in a local softball league. He has been to Canada and Norway three times with colleagues to cross country ski, and last year he took a trip to Greece with his daughter which was a group tour called "Searching for the Roots of Medicine." When his daughter was growing up he was involved in her activities, and he has a strong interest in history. A member of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, as well as the Brattleboro Historical Society, he studies Vermont postal history. Though his home is close to the office and the hospital, he spends summers at a small cottage on Spofford Lake.

But it is clear patients remain his major concern. Showing two pins a patient brought to him from the recent Little League World Championships, he remarked, "Won't a couple of my young patients enjoy getting these?" ■