



From rumor to rheumatic

First-year med students meet the real thing

By Hal Tretbar, M.D.

For the past several years I have had the privilege of introducing UofA med students to their first patients. I'm part of a program sponsored by University of Arizona Arthritis Center in which first-year students meet patients with rheumatic diseases.

The freshman class had just finished the block on musculoskeletal and autoimmune diseases. They are fascinated when they encounter a person with the actual disease. It is said that each will always remember this point in his or her medical career.

This year 22 patients with various rheumatic illnesses volunteered to participate. They find this to be such a rewarding experience that many return the next year. A rheumatologist meets and works with one patient in an exam room. The class is divided into small groups that rotate every 20 minutes to another exam room. The patients relate their stories and the



Eric Gall, M.D. talks to first-year medical students about how they will soon meet patients with rheumatic diseases. The class had just finished the core block on musculoskeletal and autoimmune disorders.



Dr. Gall demonstrates the symptoms and effects of rheumatic disease to the students, using a volunteer patient.

rheumatologist demonstrates the physical findings.

Eric Gall, M.D., professor of medicine in the Division of Rheumatology, started a program in 1975 in which medical students met patients early in their training. In 1978 a training grant from the National Institutes of Health expanded the program.

After spending time as professor of medicine at the Chicago Medical School, Eric returned to the UofA in 2010. The present program, called Physical Findings in Rheumatic Diseases for First-Year Medical Students, has invited rheumatologists from the community to participate along with arthritis center staff and Fellows. This year Steve Strong, M.D. and I were non-staff teachers. I received arthritis center staff approval to photograph and write about how the students felt when they first met a patient with a chronic rheumatic condition. Permission also was obtained from the patients and the students.

I had the honor of working with Matty Heenan. She has systemic sclerosis, or scleroderma. She is very active in the Scleroderma Foundation and knows more about the illness than I can remember. Her



Kevin Purcell describes the joint surgeries he has needed because of the damage from his juvenile arthritis as Alex Trofymenko, in the lavender shirt, listens.

tight skin has responded well to treatment and she has only slight restriction in her grips. However, she has developed some of the internal complications of her disease.

Tucson native Matthew Cravens listened to the fine crackles in Matty's lungs. He e-mailed me: "Meeting a patient with an incurable disease is always a humbling experience ... I think compassionate management is essential for the physician—educating the patient to what's happening with his or her body and what possibilities modern medicine has for treatment ... This feeling is a great motivator for me toward pursuing research."

Katie Marsh showed a lot of interest in Matty's condition. She stated, "As a first-year medical student, it is often rare to encounter "real" patients. At the UofA College of Medicine this is not the case. Speaking with patients at the rheumatology clinic helped me apply our classroom learning to clinical practice—a lesson that is invaluable and I will not soon forget."

Dr. Gall presented Kevin Purcell to the students. Kevin is a successful businessman whose severe juvenile arthritis has been in remission for many years. He has had numerous surgeries and joint replacements for deformities.

After examining Kevin, Kelsea Farrell later commented, "It was very hard to see someone so limited in their movements, but I quickly realized he had found a way to compensate and did not seem limited at all. He has a very positive outlook on life, which I think is the most important aspect of living with a chronic serious illness. I felt very privileged that he allowed us to better understand his condition."

Oleksandr "Alex" Trofymenko is a 27-year-old nontraditional medical student to say the least. He studied finance in college,



Medical student Matt Cravens is able to hear the fine crackling sounds from Matty Heenan's lungs.

worked as a high school math teacher, was a product manager for an insurance company, and owned a smoothie shop. He loves working with people and is interested in healthy living. His interests and career aspirations have led him to pursue a career in medicine.

"My first long-term encounter with someone who had a serious disease happened when I worked as a teacher," Alex said. "It was my responsibility to provide much more comprehensive care

than just teaching mathematics. Honestly, my initial reaction was anxiety. I worried that I wasn't up to the challenge. The feeling disappeared fairly quickly as I got to know the student personally and established working relationships with many others who took care of him. I learned to just accept people for who they are, rather than letting the disease be the defining characteristic of the student ... I keep this attitude with me as I go through my training. I want to work with people by treating their illnesses, and not the other way around."

The third group that I photographed was led by Meg Miller, M.D. of the Arizona Cancer Center. She explained the serious complications that Jorge Vega has developed from his systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Besides the typical red butterfly rash on his nose and cheeks, he has severe renal involvement. The students found out that SLE usually attacks middle-aged females, although any age group may be affected.



Kelsea Farrell asks permission to examine Kevin Purcell's arm. She considered it a privilege to meet him.

In a summary of the day's activities, Dr. Gall reported that the feedback from all of the students was absolutely outstanding. He pointed out that the program also gives the students a chance meet rheumatologists and find out what we do to help these patients with serious rheumatic diseases.