

A Rewarding Life

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Dr. Richard Belatti, Sr.

In the May 2006 issue of the *Mayo Anesthesiology Alumni Newsletter*, Dr. Scott Atchison wrote an article on Anesthesia Physicians Limited (APL) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, referring to it as "Mayo Clinic West." When Peter Southorn called and asked me to write something for this issue, I thought it might be of interest to detail briefly my entrance into anesthesiology, relate some of the occurrences in our forming "Mayo Clinic West" and its early years, and some of my activities after retirement.

After finishing my internship at St. Mary's in Duluth, Minnesota, I spent two years in what we then called General Practice, in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. I then relocated back to Madison, South Dakota, and joined the Madison Clinic, a group of family practitioners, where I practiced for 17 years. During those years, it was not uncommon to occasionally wish I had some specialty training, usually accentuated by my return from the Mayo Clinical Reviews which I attended faithfully each year. In the main, however, I was very happy in my practice: obstetrics, internal medicine, pediatrics, and especially surgery. I like surgery and, consequently, looked for surgical problems. I had the luxury of having our senior partner, Dr. J. A. Muggly, operate with me. I did what I could safely do, for example gallbladders, appendectomies, hernias, fractures, tonsils, some female work; but in more complicated cases, he was the surgeon and I was the assistant.

As time passed, it became apparent that we needed someone with more formal surgical training. As we began our search, some of my concerns about working with a young surgeon, or even perhaps being relegated primarily to office work, came to the fore. It was then that I began to think seriously of a residency program. I chose anesthesia, since I liked hospital work,

and especially being in the operating room. Despite concerns about my age, and assuming it was a long shot, I nevertheless submitted letters to the University of Minnesota and the Mayo Graduate School. I heard from Dr. Buckley at the University of Minnesota who said my age wouldn't be a barrier. Then I received word from Mayo and was invited to Rochester. As I left the motel room that morning, I was filled with trepidation, but it was my good fortune that Dr. John Tinker became my advocate. I was introduced to most staff, toured Saint Marys operating rooms, watched some surgery, and then met with the Chair, Dr. Alan Sessler. I feel that John Tinker was influential in convincing the recruitment committee to take a chance on me despite my 47 years of age. I had to go through the routine admitting procedures and in early December, 1975, I received a call from Dr. John Welch, Chair of the Admissions Committee, wondering, jokingly I presumed, what an old fellow like me was doing applying for a residency. Was I running from something? Assuring him I was not, in early December I received a mailgram with a letter shortly following confirming my appointment to the first year of a two-year residency in Anesthesiology.

I think perhaps it is difficult for others to feel my exhilaration and excitement at that time. Certainly there was some anxiety. This meant a complete uprooting of a very stable life, a busy practice, and friends of many years. During the early spring, we made plans to sell the house, had a large auction, and having purchased a house in Rochester, in mid-June, 1975, left South Dakota with a truck, car, dog, and kids, and arrived in our new home.

The entrance to the Mayo Anesthesiology residency program was and still is the highlight of my professional life. The change from a busy general practice to that of a resident was at first almost overwhelming. Many times during those first weeks, I wondered what I had done, but as time went on, the routine became estab-

lished and it became easier. The experiences I had, the staff and fellow residents I met and worked with, are as vivid now as then. The anesthesia staff, I presume since I was the age of many of them, treated me with great respect, as did many of the surgeons. My fellow residents also treated us well and included us in many of their activities. Is it any wonder then that I retain such a strong feeling for Mayo?

We relocated back to South Dakota in 1979 where I joined Dr. Ed Daw (Mayo 1960) and Dr. Ed Anderson in practice at Sioux Valley Hospital in Sioux Falls. Ed was a Georgetown graduate and came to Sioux Valley in 1978 from Mankato, Minnesota. Those early years were exciting. The cardiac program was just getting underway and, due to a Certificate of Need (CON) still in effect, we were the only cardiac game in town. We battled to keep it and the opposition battled to do away with it. I remember one time Ed and I were part of a packed group at the downtown courthouse where we talked to keep it and the other team took the opposite side. In early 1980, the CON was ended and our cross-town rivals started their program, though with the same surgeons, of course.

At that time, apart from cardiac surgery, our surgical caseload was fairly light and our call schedule was not overly taxing. We took call a week at a time and every third weekend. Because of our extremely competent team of nurse anesthetists, we took call from home and often did not come in unless requested. On Saturdays, we personally administered anesthesia for tubal ligations and some scheduled cases as well as supervising others. We did not, at the time, have much involvement with obstetrics other than cesarean sections. We did some pain work consisting mostly of steroid epidurals and local infiltration.

In late 1980, Ed Anderson and I talked of separating and forming our own partnership and indeed filed Articles of Incorporation with the Secretary of State on March 4, 1981, as Anesthesia Physicians Limited, with Ed as President and with myself as

Secretary/Treasurer. We rented an office in what was known as Medical Building 2 and began decorating and hiring personnel. One of the first things it became necessary to do was educate our patients as they were now receiving a charge from an anesthesiologist. We labored long and hard drafting a postcard-sized note with our APL logo, explaining what an anesthesiologist was, how we supervised the case, and that we were there to take care of emergencies or any problem that may arise. We also explained the use of diagnostic and therapeutic nerve blocks. As a result, in time, many of the early complaints we received decreased, if not ended.

During this period, our surgical case load was increasing as more young surgeons were coming to Sioux Falls. Our visibility was also increasing, and we were spending more time in house. We had started to take call every other night and came in on all cases. We had discontinued doing our Saturday routine procedures. Along with this increase in surgical case load, it became necessary for us to increase our staff. From the first, Dr. Daw had an interest in same-day surgery, and when the new unit for this was finished, he spent his time there. Our first new associate was Dr. Bill Horner (Mayo 1983). In fact, Bill came to Sioux Valley Hospital in mid-winter for a week to cover for me while I took my first winter vacation. In rather quick order, we followed with Drs. Les Steidl, Gary Halma, Doug Bell, and Scott Atchison, all Mayo graduates, and as Scott has said, "This master strategy has continued to this day." We used to feel, at times, that Ed was overwhelmed by this "Mayo inbreeding," but though his protestations were mild, he took it in good stride.

With the addition of the new partners, our anesthesia services continued to expand until we were offering complete anesthesia coverage including in-house call, continuous epidurals for labor, and complete pain services including bio-feedback. Dr. Daw retired in 1989 and we began to staff the same-day surgery unit at Sioux Valley Hospital. We had begun making preoperative visits on our surgical patients and

were especially responsive to our cardiac patients; if necessary, coming back in the evening for the visit.

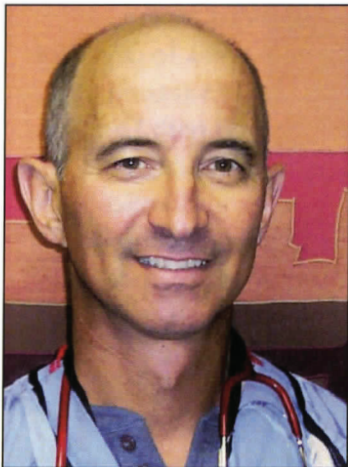
In 1988 I was elected to the South Dakota Legislature where I served from 1989 to 1992 in the State Senate during January, February, and early March. Upon my retirement in 1991, I was to learn a valuable lesson: one must retire to something. Unfortunately, I just retired! I worked briefly part-time at APL, but eventually took a part-time position with the Sioux Falls Veteran's Administration Hospital, though not doing anesthesia. Meanwhile, we had returned to Madison, South Dakota, and I was elected to the State House of Representatives, serving from 1995 to 1999. Dr. Les Steidl had also retired and moved to Colorado where he worked part-time in the Montrose Hospital, and in 2003, Dr. Ed Anderson retired and entered Blessed John 23rd Seminary in Massachusetts, from which he plans to return to South Dakota when ordained a year from now. That same year,

2003, I was appointed by Governor Mike Rounds to the South Dakota Board of Regents, a group of nine people, "with probity and wisdom," according to the constitution, which oversees our six public universities and two special schools, the School for the Deaf and the School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. I don't know about the probity and wisdom part, but I was pleased with the appointment and have been able to be involved in some aspect of State Government since 1989.

The practice at Anesthesia Physicians Limited is a direct model of the Mayo anesthesia care team. We worked with extremely competent nurse anesthetists and seeing our modest effort grow to what it has now become is indeed something to look back on with a great deal of pride. The hospital itself, with the new surgical tower and state of the art technology, is second to none in the area. With the \$400 million donation by philanthropist T. Denny Sanford, Sanford Health will be a leader in health care for years to come.

Valley Anesthesiology Consultants

Joseph Sandor, M.D., Scottsdale, Arizona



Dr. Joseph Sandor

I always eagerly anticipate the springtime in Arizona. It signals an end to frigid winter temperatures, the arrival of Cactus League Baseball, rattlesnakes, and soon-to-be dropping green fees. In addition, it provides me with an opportunity to reconnect with old friends and associates at the Mayo Clinic sponsored "Symposium on Anesthesia and Perioperative Medicine" in Scottsdale.

This past February, I had the good fortune to meet up with Peter Southorn and Kevin Ronan. Over a couple of lunches, we reminisced about training days in Rochester. We spoke of resident colleagues and where they ended up in practice. Recognizing the significant emigration from Mayo Clinic Rochester to the Valley of the Sun (with a sizeable number

of physicians ending up in my current group, Valley Anesthesiology Consultants), Peter felt it would be an interesting read for the *Mayo Anesthesiology Alumni Newsletter*, akin to the recent Mayo Clinic West article about those Mayo trained anesthesiologists in Sioux Falls. It is with great pleasure and thanks that I make this contribution to the newsletter.

I thought it would be worth talking a little bit about the evolution of Valley Anesthesiology Consultants. When I left Rochester in 1990, I joined a small group of anesthesiologists committed to the growth of anesthesia practice in North Scottsdale. I was the first Mayo-trained physician in the group, which grew quickly from five to nearly 30, when we merged with Valley Anesthesiology. Those Mayo-trained physicians to join after me in Scottsdale include Larry Drewsen (resident, 1995-96), Kyle Hagstrom (resident, 1994-97), Eric Gordon