



Care from Dr. Bristol has come full circle for the Sharpe family. He treated Darlynn and Brandon as children and now their son, Cason.

Dr. William P. Bristol

A Community Treasure

Generations of families have benefited from his harmonious approach to pediatrics. “You’ll hear children in the background. It’s noisy around here,” says William “Bill” P. Bristol, M.D. A pediatrician for more years than his patients or their parents have been alive, Dr. Bristol takes it all in stride. In a lifetime of pediatric practice, he has literally seen it all. For the past 15 years, Dr. Bristol has cared for children at the Community Care Center, located in Brunswick, Georgia.

Changes and challenges

Reflecting on his years in medicine, he says: “Vaccines are one of the most significant changes in

pediatrics. When I was little, I had friends die from polio. When I was in medical school, polio, measles and diphtheria vaccines didn’t exist.” Because those childhood diseases were eradicated in the U.S. for decades, Dr. Bristol now finds himself “faced with young parents who want to know why their babies need immunization — 12 to 15 percent of kids attending school here haven’t been vaccinated for anything.”

It’s a difficult conversation, but one he’s willing to have as often as necessary. And he practices what he preaches, being among the first of many Health System providers to roll up their sleeves for a COVID-19 vaccine last December.

From Michigan to Vietnam

Dr. Bristol grew up in a relatively poor part of south-central Michigan, where career options were limited to farming, manufacturing or working at a prison. After discovering the possibilities inherent in a medical career, he never looked back, even when his choice took him to Vietnam. “I spent 30 months practicing pediatrics on a military base of 50,000 people; 10,000 of them were children,” he says. “I also flew into Da Nang to treat infectious diseases like malaria and dengue fever.”

After Vietnam, Dr. Bristol returned stateside. He spent several years teaching medical students in Michigan and later Fargo, North Dakota, where he served as assistant dean at North Dakota University and vice chief of staff at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. Eventually, he was “recruited away from the frozen north” to help develop the Mercer University School of Medicine in Macon. In 1986, Dr. Bristol was recruited away again — this time to Brunswick, at a time when the city had just two pediatricians.

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Coming full circle

One local family has their own full-circle story about Dr. Bristol. Brandon and Darlynn Sharpe grew up in the Golden Isles, and both were patients of his.

“He was always a calming, peaceful presence,” Ms. Sharpe says. Her husband agrees. “I have no negative memories of going to the doctor. There was no crying. He has treated a lot of babies, but he has cared for much more.”

When the Sharpes needed a pediatrician for their newborn son, Cason, they asked for recommendations. They were pleasantly surprised to learn that Dr. Bristol was still practicing. “The highest recommendations were for Dr. Bristol,” Ms. Sharpe says. “My father, Chuck Bumgardner, works at the hospital, and he told us Dr. Bristol is still outstanding.”

Mr. Sharpe adds, “It was an easy decision.”

Dr. Bristol recalls his first visit with Cason a few days after his birth. “It was a fun, high point of the day,” he says. “Over the years, I’ve seen children become young adults. I lose them for a while, and they then come back with babies of their own.” In some families, he’s now caring for the third generation.

A musical approach to medicine

Besides longevity, Dr. Bristol’s musical approach to medicine sets him apart from his peers. As a youth, he was a classically trained string player who later became a professional upright bass musician. He now uses his talent to put patients at ease and get their attention. “Most preschoolers love music. We play music together — singing, whistling, using tongue depressors as drumsticks.”

He admits to spending more time talking to patients than parents, who inadvertently learn a lot by listening to the conversation.

The personal touch

Despite the “immense changes” in medicine,

Dr. Bristol enjoys his work. “You keep the personal touch in medicine by doing what you love,” he says. “I’ve had doctor friends who retired in their 60s. Half of them returned from retirement after a year. Pediatrics can be arduous, but the kids are delightful, and most of the time, the parents are delightful. I’ll probably always be involved in medicine.”

When asked how he wants to be remembered, Dr. Bristol cites three passions that have guided his life: “He was a good doctor, a good teacher and a good musician.”

Considering all the lives he has touched, whether alleviating pain, imparting knowledge or giving new parents peace of mind, he is sure to be remembered for all of those gifts and more.