

## **Docs Who Are Always In**

By Michael McLeod

Photographs By Greg Johnston

### **In a troubled time for primary care physicians, concierge medicine is offering a more personal option.**

You walk into your doctor's waiting room. It's empty. From sheer force of habit, you look around for a magazine – no, two magazines; no, better make that three – and a comfortable chair to dig in for the customary wait. Then someone speaks to you. The words are familiar enough but coming so suddenly, they take you by surprise:

“The doctor,” says the voice, “will see you now.”

You did not dream this, and I did not make it up. It happens as a matter of routine for patrons of a model of primary health care designed to alleviate some of its chronic aggravations. It's called “concierge” medicine, and over the past 14 years, more than 5,000 physicians across the country have converted to it, including at least eight in Central Florida.

#### **DOCTOR JAMES SCELFO**

*Back to basics, via the bayou.*



It's fairly certain that Jim Scelfo is the only doctor in Central Florida who will always associate the practice of medicine with his mother's crawfish etouffee.

Scelfo grew up as the youngest of eight children in New Iberia, Louisiana. His father was a high-school football coach, his mother a high-school teacher. With that many children, money was always tight, and Scelfo suspects that the crawfish etouffee that his mother occasionally brought to the family doctor was actually for payment of bills that had been kindly overlooked.

Scelfo likes telling that little story, partly because it reminds him of his bayou days, and partly because it's a quick way to drive home a point about the difference between small-town medicine and its big-city cousin. “By the way,” he says, “if a doctor accepted something like that as a payment today, it would be illegal.”

Concierge medicine is a throwback to another era. So is Scelfo. So is the community where he set up his concierge medical practice. It's in Celebration, the Osceola County community designed to evoke the layout and architecture of an early 20th-century small town. There's no sign on the outside of Scelfo's office, which could be mistaken for just another quaint, bungalow-style residence on a tidy neighborhood thoroughfare that curves off the town's main drag. There are no magazines whatsoever – nor is there any need for them, Scelfo says – in a waiting room decorated with New Orleans Jazz Festival posters.

The 39-year-old physician realized early on that he wasn't cut out for a traditional primary care practice. He discovered as much shortly after graduating from Louisiana State University School of Medicine, when a disheartening, eight-month stint in a primary care practice soured him on high-volume medical practice. “If I weren't doing this,” he says of his concierge practice, “I wouldn't be a doctor at all.”

One of the things Scelfo likes about the concierge model of primary care is that, with its emphasis on preventative medicine and patient education, it rewards a good physician's natural inclination to empower patients to keep themselves healthy.

"It's a model that could save the system money," Scelfo says. "Think about it: As a doctor, I'm a lot better off if I can educate patients so well that they take excellent care of themselves, and I only have to see them once or twice a year. That's great for me, great for the system. On the other hand, if I have to see you 10 times a year, I'm losing money."

Ever the throwback, Scelfo's favorite quote is from William Mayo, the 19th-century medical pioneer: "The aim of medicine is to prevent disease and prolong life. The ideal of medicine is to eliminate the need of a physician."

Ever mindful of his roots, Scelfo stages a yearly picnic for his patients. The highlight of the menu: boiled crawfish, direct to Celebration from the bayous back home.