

Happy doctors



Kurt Ellison

Watsonville's emergency room-doctors, from left, Stuart Simon, Steven Plumb, Kent Benedict, Sterling Lewis, Michael McGannon, John Walther, Stanley Hajduk, Robert Korn.

Watsonville ER team has reason to crow

By KATHARINE BALL
STAFF WRITER

The eight doctors who staff Watsonville Community Hospital Emergency Room are a rare team: All of them have passed a rigorous national exam certifying them as tops in their specialty of emergency medicine.

The exam, given by the American Board of Emergency Medicine, is taken on a voluntary basis, and exists like a kind of Mt. Everest in the medical world. One attempts it because it is there, and to pass it is a glorious accomplishment. It also provides a sort of objective testimony that those who have suffered its rigors and survived are among the elite of the profession.

Of those who attempt the test, only about half pass, said Dr. Kent Benedict, medical director of Watsonville's emergency department, and only about a third of emergency physicians nationwide have such certification.

Benedict is tickled pink that his full staff has now passed the two-day exam.

"It's really rather presti-

gious," he said. "It means you have been tested to the highest standards."

On the first day of the exam, emergency doctors answer a battery of written questions. They read sample x-rays, interpret electrocardiograms, and answer "many, many detailed questions on the use and misuse of medications," Benedict said.

To pass on to the second day of the exam, the doctor must answer at least 75 to 80 percent of the written questions correctly, he said.

The second day consists of an oral exam "which is probably the most stressful exam being given in the United States," Benedict said.

For a full eight hours, examiners role-play emergency-room patients, suffering various traumas and illnesses. Other examiners act as family members of each "patient." The doctor being examined must correctly diagnose and treat all of them.

"It's like a psychodrama," Benedict said. The doctor being

examined can only "lose" one patient out of the seven to nine cases with which he is presented.

"(The exam) is designed to reproduce the stress of an emergency room," Benedict said. "It simulates the real scene."

To be eligible to take the special certification exam, a doctor must have practiced emergency medicine for five years, or completed a residency in it while undergoing his initial medical training.

Benedict said his group of physicians decided about six years ago they wanted to go for the certification. Newer staff members, including Dr. Steven Plumb, who joined the staff about 3½ years ago, were swept along in the plan, Benedict said.

The 100-percent board certification of emergency room physicians "is not equalled by any other hospital in the Central Coast area," Benedict said.

"That might be surprising to this community, because Watsonville is a small, semi-rural town, with a small hospital,"

Benedict said. "To find this level of professional accomplishment might be surprising."

While emergency doctors face perhaps the greatest unpredictability and stress of anyone in the medical profession, there are advantages to their specialty over other sorts of medical practice, Benedict said.

The hours are more fixed and predictable than in other areas of medicine, he said, leaving emergency doctors plenty of time for outside pursuits. Of the Watsonville emergency staff, one doctor, John Walther, is a principal cellist with the Santa Cruz Symphony. Dr. Robert Korn serves as chairman of the county Arts Commission. Dr. Sterling Lewis, who just became the last of the doctors to complete board certification, is also an enthusiastic athlete who recently returned from the Iron Man Triathlon in Hawaii, Benedict said.

The doctors who make up the Watsonville emergency team are Benedict, Plumb, Walther, Korn, Lewis, Stanley Hajduk, Stuart Simon, and Michael McGannon.