

# THE GOLD Standard

*Celebrating physician excellence*

**SAYING THANKS**

Dr. Christopher Shaari, an ear, nose and throat doctor in Hackensack, was nominated by a patient for The Doc Award.



**BY LUCY PROBERT**

Photos by Anne-Marie Caruso

**G**ratifying, humbling and touching are words used by some of the area physicians given a very special award from a surprising source: their patients. Ten years ago, The Arnold P. Gold Foundation established The Gold Doc Award, a way for patients to recognize and celebrate their favored physician's compassionate and clinically excellent care. And it has left doctors who have received the award, in the words of Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., chairman of the department of urology at Hackensack University Medical Center, "Very touched and honored. It's one of the most important awards I have received." Christopher Shaari, M.D., adds, "No matter what happens in a day, when you look at the letter that your patient

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wrote about you, it keeps you grounded for why you're doing what you do."

The Gold Foundation, started in 1988 by Dr. Arnold Gold and his wife, Sandra, is based in Englewood Cliffs and works to teach medical students and physicians the importance of humanistic care along with clinical and medical excellence. And this award fits right into

their philosophy of nurturing the tradition of the caring physician. "We want patients to know that it's legitimate to have the expectation of exemplary treatment that's patient-centered, that they should expect a compassionate, listening, trusting and understanding physician," says Robert Gurmankin, vice president of development at The Gold Foundation. "By giving this award we want to motivate and reinforce doctors to focus on humanistic care along with medical excellence."

In the 14 years since Hackensack resident Mildred Schwartz was first diagnosed with multiple myeloma, she has been seen by a lot of doctors. And as a proud survivor of that devastating disease, she has a lot to say about some of those who have treated her. “When I heard about the award, I ended up nominating four of my doctors,” she says. “Nowadays we spend a lot of time criticizing, but when you find a physician who treats you with respect and compassion, this is a very nice way of acknowledging that.”

Patient-centered, compassionate care should be the norm, not the exception, but with the advances in medical technology, the focus can sometimes turn away from the patient. “There are so many things that go on in medicine that push us away from the patient,” says Kenneth Rubin, M.D., a gastroenterologist from Englewood Hospital and Medical Center who received the Gold Doc Award three years ago. “They’re good things as far as technology and computerization, but I think, as doctors, we always have to remember that there is a patient on the receiving end of all of this data that we’re reviewing, and in addition to making the right diagnosis, it’s important how it’s presented and how the care is continued.” It’s a simple recipe, says Christopher Shaari, M.D., an ear, nose and throat doctor in Hackensack. “Just be yourself and remember your mission is to get your patients through what they’re in to see you for.”

And according to Rubin, taking the time to listen and get to know patients actually improves their medical care. “If you can relate to a patient better, then you’re more apt to get information from them beyond the basics. You get a clearer understanding of what they’re thinking and feeling, and that can aid in their diagnosis and treatment.”

Jordan J. Cohen, M.D., chairman of the board of The Gold Foundation, is a big believer in the power of Gold Docs. “I believe very strongly that the vast majority of physicians provide this kind of compassionate care, so it’s important that we continue to find ways, like the Gold Doc Award, to recognize them and bolster their resolve to continue to do so.”



Gold Doc Marzena Odorczyk, M.D., who practices internal medicine in Totowa and is also a clinical instructor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, gives this advice to her medical students: “You have to develop a real relationship with your patients because you’re not fooling anybody. They look at everything, they know who I am and if I care, which is why you actually do have to care.”

Gold Docs receive a pin with a stethoscope to wear on their white coat, a letter that contains the sentiments of their patients and a plaque that says: “Nominated by a patient for their sensitivity, kindness and compassion in the practice of medicine.” More than 100 doctors received the award last year.

According to Bob Gurmankin of The Gold Foundation, although the process of nominating a physician for a Gold Doc Award isn’t arduous, taking the time to express appreciation, thinking of the right thing to say, can be a barrier to some. But to the grateful doctor receiving the award, it’s priceless. “There is something meaningful, beyond just getting a plaque and a pin. To have in the letter the patient’s own words is very special,” says Gurmankin.

Schwartz encourages others to consider going through the nominating procedure when they have had exceptional care. “If you feel like your doctor has really helped you, treated you well, then you should say something about it, certainly to your doctor directly but also through this award.”

What does this award mean to the doctors who receive it? “I was absolutely humbled by it,” says Sawczuk. “When I got the letter, it really made me reflect on how, as doctors, we’re perceived by our patients. This kind of an award puts things in perspective. It means a lot.”

What it all comes down to, the Gold Docs agree, is putting the patient first. “It’s compassion, it’s respect, it’s empathy,” says Sawczuk. “Patients come in to see me and they say, ‘I don’t want to take up your time, doc.’ And I say, ‘I’m taking up your time, I’m working for you!’ That’s what we have to remember ...that they’re the boss.” ❖

#### PATIENT PREFERRED

(Top to bottom) Dr. Marzena Odorczyk, Dr. Ihor Sawczuk and Dr. Kenneth Rubin have all received The Gold Doc Award for physician excellence.