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Physician Spotlight: Dr. Tamara Folz

BY HOLLI W. HAYNIE

For pediatrician Tamara Folz, owning her own practice wasn't something she foresaw on her map of life, nor did she plan it; yet her choices led her right to that spot.

Her clinic, Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine of East Memphis, has more than 2,000 patients in their database, but its intimate atmosphere (she only has a physician assistant, two nurses, a receptionist and another part-time pediatrician) makes for an ideal setting to build patient relationships. These relationships with her patients are the most important thing for Folz, who cares for children from birth through college.

While she may not have known she wanted to own her own practice, Folz says she always wanted to be a doctor, and she achieved the distinction of being first in her class at University of Tennessee medical school.

"My dad was an OB/GYN, my mom's a nurse," she says. "When I went to medical school, I loved everything I did, but I smiled all the time when I worked with kids."

After UT, she worked at Le Bonheur for three years, then a larger pediatric practice for a year-and-a-half before joining her current clinic in 2002. When she joined the established clinic, one of the senior partners had already retired ... two years later the other partner retired, leaving it open for her to buy. She decided to go for it.

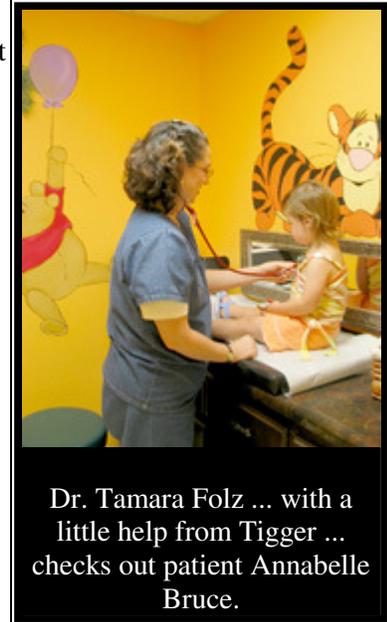
"It's a juggling act, but I think it's great," she says. "Before I was in a group with 10 pediatricians, and I didn't have that connection with the patients. It just didn't have the continuity. Here, we really know the patients. It's more of a family atmosphere," she says.

"I like the flexibility, but I'm learning by fire because I never really expected to own a practice," Folz continues. "Learning the business aspects, the insurance companies and reimbursements can be very frustrating."

Folz takes pride in not only the family atmosphere, but in the special services she offers patients. The clinic is open seven days a week and offers checkups and sick visits on Saturdays. Plus, she says, she always answers her after-hours calls. Mothers of newborns can take advantage of lactation clinics at the facility from Dr. Julie Ware, pediatrician and lactation consultant.

"What's great is I took a survey of patients and found out that most patients want to breast-feed," says Folz. "I have an associate pediatrician, and her passion is breast-feeding. If OBs have patients who have trouble breast-feeding, they refer to her, and she sends back reports."

Folz says offering this service has brought in more patient referrals and more importantly, motivates women to breast-feed, which is healthier for babies.



Dr. Tamara Folz ... with a little help from Tigger ... checks out patient Annabelle Bruce.

"It's good to have an advocate," she adds. "Breast-feeding is difficult the first couple of weeks after pregnancy because of all the hormonal changes, all the stress and no sleep. If you have someone that's your cheerleader, you're more likely to stick with it."

The best part of her job is being around the kids. She says their perspective on life is refreshing. She also notes that you don't have to wonder if they are healing ... as soon as they feel better, it's obvious. It's that kind of energy Folz likes to experience.

Folz is married and has two daughters of her own — Abby, age 3, and Sarah, age 15 months. Folz says having kids really changed how she looked at her job.

"I know a lot of people have kids, but having your own kids, you really gain a different perspective of what I do," she says. "I was out of residency for three years before having kids. [Being a mother] really has given me something more to offer patients."

Folz approaches each child as an opportunity to give them a good foundation for healthy behaviors. During checkups she will ask parents and children if they wear seatbelts, brush their teeth every night and wear sunscreen. For older kids, she will ask them if they smoke, have sex, drink alcohol or ever get into a car with someone who has been drinking.

"I'm asking these questions because that's the biggest risk to their health — behaviors," she says. "I can do something about that. I'll tell parents when they come in that children who are around cigarette smoke get sick a lot more often, and I've been able to actually help parents quit smoking."

She continues, "When they're younger and I examine their private parts, I'll ask them, 'Who should look down here?' I say, 'Your parents or the doctor and only a doctor if a nurse is in the room.' If you start that at a young age, then they know that area is off limits."

It's equally important to make sure patients are comfortable and understand the procedures being done to them. During painful procedures, such as shots, Folz and her staff perform distraction techniques. They also allow children to touch equipment and talk to them about what equipment does. She finds that children who participate in checkups typically aren't as afraid.

Of course, even though it is rare, there have been occasions when children have locked themselves in the bathroom or had to be chased around as they tried to avoid getting a shot ... but, then again, that's all part of the fun of being a pediatrician.