



Surgical lifestyles:

Surgeons redefine “family practice”

by Diane S. Schneidman, Senior Editor

Andrew D. Burch, Sr., MD, FACS, and his progeny give a whole new meaning to the phrase “family practice.” Two of Dr. Burch’s four sons—Andrew D. Burch, Jr., MD, FACS, and Ernest G. Burch, MD, FACS—are in a general surgery group practice with him in Mobile, AL. Another son, Danny Burch, MD, is currently in the surgical residency program at the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans, LA. When he finishes training, he will join his father’s practice as well.

Meanwhile, several other Burch family members are pursuing careers in the health care professions. Dr. Danny Burch’s twin brother, Tommy, is an anesthesiology resident at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. Tricia Burch is attending Tulane Medical School in New Orleans, LA, and is considering moving on to a surgical residency. Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr., said his daughter is doing very well in medical school and that if she decides to become a surgeon, she, too, will become part of the family’s practice.

All together, eight of Dr. Burch’s nine children are in health care-related fields. Susan is a chemical engineer in charge of science and technology policy at a major pharmaceutical company. Marianne is a nurse, and Cathy is a medical technologist. Barbara is a homemaker.

Childhood exposure

Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr., attributes his children’s career decisions to their upbringing, joking that he “started recruiting at the moment of conception.” More seriously, though, “They saw that their mother was happy and that we were happy together and that I enjoyed surgery,” Dr. Burch added.

Dr. Ernie Burch echoed his father’s sentiments. “I always knew he was happy, and that encouraged me to go into surgery,” he said.

Although Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr.’s wife, Mary, opted to be a homemaker and handle most of the child-raising responsibilities, Dr. Burch always made a point of taking time away from work to be with his family. He said it was and still is very important for surgeons with families to have “protected time off,” meaning at least one full day a week and one weekend every month when they can turn off their beepers and enjoy their personal lives.

Dr. Burch said he acquired the habit of taking this protected time off while working with Ernest DeBakey, MD, FACS. “When I needed to take a day or weekend to be with my family, I would tell Dr. DeBakey, and he’d cover for me. In return, I’d cover for him when he’d go to a meeting or on vacation,” Dr. Burch said.

During their protected time off, Dr. Burch and his children would hunt, fish, or otherwise spend time together. He noted that it was very important to him and his wife that their children see that raising a family was their top priority and that it was possible for a surgeon to be committed to both his family and his patients.

The tradition of giving his partner protected time off has carried over into the practice that Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr., and his sons run. "When you're in private practice, you have to be willing to and want to put in long hours," Dr. Ernie Burch said. "But we also make sure each of us gets one or two weekends off every month. You have to be able to clock off."

Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr., raised his children so that they could see both his role as a father and the professional side of his life. When they entered high school, his children would work in his office with plenty of time away from there to study and socialize. When they were in college, the children would work in the operating room as scrub technicians. "Actually being in the OR, it became obvious that I had interest and talent in [surgery]," Dr. Ernie Burch said.

This is the same sort of exposure and opportunity that sparked Dr. Andrew Burch, Sr.'s, interest in surgery when he was young. His father was a golf pro, and Dr. Burch worked as a caddy at the course where his father worked. "One of my father's best friends was a general surgeon, and he took me into the operating room," he said. "I saw what he was doing in the OR, and I thought it looked like something I could do."

Togetherness and trust

Drs. Ernie and Andrew Burch, Jr., and Sr., spend much of their workday together, either operating together on major cases or giving each other guiding support. Both Drs. Ernie and Andrew Burch, Sr., say that the biggest advantage of working together as a family unit is an unflinching level of



Dr. Andrew D. Burch, Sr., (center with plaque) is flanked by his family after receiving the 2001 Paul W. Bryant Alumni-Athlete at the University of Alabama. Dr. Burch played football for the University of Alabama as an undergraduate student. Pictured to the left of Dr. Andrew D. Burch, Sr., are (left to right): Catherine E. Burch, Patricia L. Burch (seated), Dr. Andrew D. Burch, Jr., and Dr. Daniel C. Burch. Pictured to his right are (left to right): Mary H. Burch, Dr. Thomas M. Burch, Barbara Burch Mjor, Marianne Burch Haas (seated), Susan Burch Waltman, and Dr. Ernest G. Burch.

mutual faith in and respect for each other's capabilities.

"I don't think there's any question in their minds but that I'm here to help them, and they're here for me," Andrew Burch, Sr., said. "My sons do not work for me. We work together."

"It's obvious that they have my best interests at heart, and I have theirs at heart," added Dr. Ernie Burch. "If I have a question about a case, I know I can pick up the phone and they'll be there" to offer wise counsel.

Nonetheless, the three surgeons rarely question each other's best professional judgment. "Dad, I think, sometimes fears that he's going to get too involved in our cases," Dr. Ernie Burch said. "He wants us to feel like his equal in the OR, so he won't really make a lot of suggestions unless we ask for his help. Andy and I have a happier medium. If we see something from the other side of the table, we'll tell each other about it."

Another advantage of working with family, according to Dr. Ernie Burch, is that it eliminates many worries about the division of time and money. "There's an unwritten amount of trust," he said. □