The Patient Comes First

Rinehart Clinic helps make health care affordable for all

By Laura Swanson

The Rinehart Clinic’s mission of service in rural north Tillamook County is “to provide high quality, comprehensive primary health care to all in the community, regardless of their financial circumstances.” It is the same way the Rinehart family has provided health care to the area since 1913.

“It’s been the tradition of the Rinehart Clinic from the beginning: to take care of everyone in the community, regardless of their ability to pay,” says Patty Rinehart, chief fundraiser, envelope-stuffer and third-generation family member.

The Rinehart Clinic was founded by Dr. Harvey Rinehart, grandfather of the current medical director, Dr. Harry Rinehart, who is Patty’s brother.

For more than 91 years, three generations of Rinehart family physicians have cared for three generations of North Tillamook County residents.

The clinic was reorganized as a tax-exempt Oregon corporation in 1996 by a group of community leaders who recognized the importance of maintaining a rural health clinic for this area after several years of uncertainty about the availability of local health care providers.

The clinic is funded by fees, foundation grants and donations from the community. There is no government funding. The clinic has 11 employees, including Dr. Rinehart and physician assistants Rob Soans and Sandy Kosik.

“The staff comes early and stays late,” says Patty. “There’s not enough money for more staff, so this great caring group just gets it done. The same goes for our core group of about a dozen volunteers. Someone will see the need, and take care of it.

“It’s really important to understand that we’re not a ‘free’ clinic. About 25 to 30 percent of our patients are either uninsured or underinsured, with services not covered by their insurance.”

The clinic had about 10,000 visits by 2,000 patients in the past year, and 25 percent of those visits were low-income patients. While other medical clinics increase fees, the Rinehart Clinic has reduced them for the uninsured and underinsured, by adopting a sliding fee scale more liberal than the industry norm.

Thanks to the clinic’s fundraising efforts, which supplement
patient revenue, the clinic operates in the black every year.

In addition to strong community financial support, strong volunteer support has been a key to the clinic’s operations. Volunteers help maintain medical files and monthly statements. Retired nurses volunteer to give flu and pneumonia shots. The board of directors advises on all aspects of clinic operations without compensation.

“Dr. Rinehart’s way with patients is what makes this a special place,” says full-time volunteer Beverly Zacker. “Dr. Rinehart truly cares about his patients, especially the elderly. He takes wonderful care of my 94-year-old mother.”

The clinic won three awards from the Oregon Office of Rural Health in 2004, including Oregon’s Outstanding Rural Health Clinic.

“We earned the award, but the real reason we’re here is to take care of patients’ suffering and illness, case by case,” says Dr. Rinehart. “The patients’ success stories are what sustain us and create passion in our work. They illustrate how the clinic works to build a healthier community, one where people are well and working to their capacity, empowered to build a better future for themselves and their children, a community that respects and cares for its elders. This health care system we’ve developed is a model for the rest of rural America.

Dr. Rinehart says several retired people approached him in the spring, stating they could no longer afford the co-pay for their medications.

This was the beginning of the clinic’s “Prescription Assistance Project,” initially staffed by a volunteer. The project helps clinic patients receive free and discounted prescriptions worth approximately $25,000 a month. Nearly 250 patients a month are assisted in accessing pharmaceutical company programs.

The project staff helps patients fill out application forms, and follows up. Most of the prescriptions are for chronic conditions that, if left untreated, would result in poorer health and more expensive medical costs.

The Oregon Office of Rural Health named the clinic’s prescription program the Outstanding Rural Health Program. Loretta Woodward, who manages it, was named Outstanding Volunteer of the Year for 2004.

A grant from the Spirit Mountain Community Fund will keep the project going a second year. In 2003, grants and donations totaled more than $100,000. Included in that amount were proceeds from the annual Crab Derby and a Fourth of July fireworks sale.

“The Crab Derby started when the Laviolette family, owners of the Jetty Fishery Marina, sat down and decided they wanted to host a community event to benefit the clinic because they were so appreciative of the clinic’s services,” says Patty. “The winery donated the use of their space, and we hope several local chefs will participate by providing their specialties for a good feast—from hors d’oeuvres to desserts. And for the auction, our hope is to have some extraordinary items up for bid.”

Only 100 tickets will be available.

To donate an item to the auction, contact Joyce at (503) 368-4284. For tickets, contact Rivena at (503) 368-5131.

The Rinehart Clinic is located at 230 Rowe St. in Wheeler. For more information, to make a donation or for an appointment, call (503) 368-5182, or visit the clinic’s Web site at www.rinehartclinic.org.