Provider Portrait

Skill, Organization, and Humor an Award-Winning Combo

By Todd Neff

Showing up to work with a box full of balloon scrotums won’t necessarily help win you a Teacher of the Year Award from the Colorado Academy of Family Physicians, but in Corey Lyon’s case, it didn’t hurt, either.

Lyon, DO, has since November 2012 been medical director of University of Colorado Hospital’s AF Williams Family Medicine Center at Stapleton, where CU School of Medicine Department of Family Medicine residents ply their trade. He has been collecting awards in the way others collect Hummel figurines or shoes.

He received the Residency Teacher of the Year Award (voted on by CU Family Medicine residents) in 2012 and 2013, as well as the Department of Family Medicine’s 2013 Clinician of the Year Award. He followed these up with the Colorado Academy of Family Physicians’ (CAFP) 2013 Teacher of the Year Award, bestowed in December.

His success has been partly about who he is. Those nominating him for the CAFP’s 2013 award described someone with an abundance of empathy, clinical and interpersonal sensitivity, and a major-league sense of humor. But it’s also about who he once was.

Base of operations. His excellent posture aside, Lyon’s gentle bearing betrays no hint of a military background. But indeed, the Aurora Rangeview High School class president and Colorado State University product received his medical degree at Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences on a U.S. Navy scholarship and shipped off to Florida, where he rose to chief resident at Naval Hospital Jacksonville. Lyon was then deployed to Naval Hospital Sigonella on the Italian isle of Sicily. He was among six family physicians, an emergency medicine doc and an obstetrician serving 6,000 military personnel, contractors and their families.

“We lived on base and the clinic was on base, so it was really like small-town America,” Lyon said in his office last week. “My patients were also my neighbors.”

He did everything from prescribing antibiotics to performing colonoscopies to delivering babies. Along the way, he learned how to lead — he was an officer, after all — and came to appreciate the fruits of preparation and organization. He also learned how to navigate a big, complicated bureaucracy. Three years into his tour in Sicily, Lyon was a lieutenant commander with seven years of service under his belt, his obligation to the military complete. He and his wife Lydia decided it was time to come home.

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“I just want to go somewhere I can hang my own curtains,” she told him.

**Learning teaching.** Lyon wanted to go somewhere he could not only see patients, but also teach. In 2007, Lyon, Lydia and their three young daughters landed back in Kansas City in the residency program at Research Family Medicine.

“I got my faculty feet underneath me,” he said, while working with residents and navigating the world of graduate medical education. A 2008 faculty development fellowship at the University of North Carolina proved pivotal to his teaching career. He learned some tricks on how to teach adult learners, such as providing real-time feedback with “signposts” that alert the student that they’re about to get feedback.

One of the most effective ways of doing this, Lyon said, is to say: “I’m giving you feedback now.”

He also learned, in North Carolina and back in Kansas City, that only a precious few are blessed with the gift of being brilliant teachers-on-the-fly who can improvise with great pedagogical effect.

“That’s not me,” he said. “So when going into a teaching situation or inpatient rounds, I always have some sort of plan on the content, how I want to communicate it, and how I want to engage the residents.”

**About those balloons…** Hence the blow-up scrotums, the story of which third-year resident Kimberly Insel, MD, MPH, related in nominating Lyon to the CAFP. Prior to Lyon’s arrival back in Colorado in 2011, the Family Medicine evidence-based curriculum as well as procedural training (think IUD insertions, vasectomies and the like) were lacking, Insel noted.

“When he learned we had no vasectomy models and no vasectomy training module, he created one,” she related. “I was particularly impressed when he showed up to our vasectomy workshop with a box full of balloons that doubled as scrotums. I asked him how he was able to make so many versions of the vasectomy model from scratch. He, with some trepidation, sheepishly admitted that his three daughters had spent their weekend helping him but luckily they did not know per se that they were making balloon scrotums,” she said.

“He has created a persona around our residency,” Insel added in a phone interview. “Very fun, very smart.”

There’s a purpose behind it all, Lyon said.

“Sometimes I tease them: 90 percent of what I do is entertaining you long enough until you learn it,” he said.

**Road trips.** Lyon is sharing the wealth, too. He is editor-in-chief of HelpDesk Answers, an evidence-based writing project. He also serves as vice president of education and membership for the Family Practice Inquiries Network, an organization focused on teaching evidence-based techniques for Family Medicine practice. In that role, he travels widely to teach residency program leaders how to increase their scholarship.

Insel said Lyon inspired her to stick with academic medicine post-residency, and embodies what she hopes to become.

“He is a rare balance of someone who is both down-to-earth and understands what steps are necessary to help residents gain confidence, knowledge and mastery in their work,” she said. “He represents for me exactly what I hope to be someday for students and residents.”

For Lyon’s part, the benefits flow both ways.

“I find myself getting excited and getting my energy when I’m surrounded by residents who are enthusiastic about learning,” he said. “It makes me want to try a bit harder to make it interesting, entertaining, and memorable. It drives me to challenge myself to always teach it differently.”