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Ocean City, Md. | Free

Dr. Gong still going strong

Ocean City urgent care physician marks 25 years in the resort: Page 2



41ST WHITE MARLIN OPEN SET AUG. 4

The White Marlin Open, the world's largest billfish tournament, returns to Ocean City for its 41st year Aug. 4-8.

Page 32

HAVE A PEACHY GOOD TIME

The sixth annual Berlin Peach Festival on Saturday pays homage to a tradition dating back to 1913.

Page 7

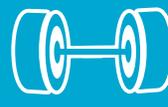


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COVER STORY

Dr. Gong still going strong

Ocean City urgent care physician marks 25 years in the resort

By Brian Shane
Staff Writer

Most days, you'll see Dr. Victor Gong treating patients. But you also may find him programming his own patient-tracking software. Or writing a column for the newspaper. Or painting — Gong says he recently found himself atop a ladder, paintbrush in hand, when a contractor dropped the ball on touch-up work to his office building. He's even done some of his own carpentry there.

"If you can save money, it costs patients less," he said of his constant do-it-yourself work. "You have to do that."

It's that independent spirit that's defined Gong's medical practice and urgent care clinic, 75th Street Medical, which marks 25 years in Ocean City this summer. Gong still works upwards of 70 hours a week, with the help of a cadre of seasonal medical professionals and office staff.

Gong says his goal always is to stay ahead of the curve in his own version of resort town frontier medicine, or else he'd be out of business. Independent physicians like himself can act quicker to make changes to their



GRANT L. GURSKY PHOTO

Dr. Victor Gong splints the wrist of patient Sarah Sharkey at his 75th Street facility in Ocean City.

own practice, but the risks of failure are greater. "You aren't in meetings all day talking about it. You try something, if it works, it works," he said.

In the summer, the clinic is a self-contained emergency room in miniature. They have intravenous drips, X-rays, electrocardiograms. Gong stocks a small pharmaceutical supply, for emergency needs, because many local pharmacies are only open during regular business hours.

They can handle all manner of rudimentary injuries and symptoms, even setting fractures,

Gong says — but if it's really a serious issue, Gong himself will be the first person to put his patient on an ambulance to the hospital.

"If you can walk in, we can take care of you. If you can't walk in, you probably shouldn't be here," he quips. "People kind of know what to do."

The office also includes a family practice. The newest part of the clinic's business — and new is relative, because he's more than a decade into it — focuses on weight control, nutrition and wellness.

Gong speaks enthusi-

astically about this side of his job, because it's about practicing preventative medicine and not a triage for bumps and bruises. It's also a money-maker for a business Gong admits is as seasonal as any other in Ocean City. In a May 30, 2000, interview in the newsletter Practice Options, Gong said his weight control program grossed \$90,000 in its first year.

"It's hard to do business in Ocean City, number one, for any business, much less the medical business," Gong said. "It's so specialized — you need specialized help, specialized equipment, a lot of regulations. And the regulations have gotten worse each year. That's a national trend, but in an area like this where it's more isolated, it's harder to keep with those regulations. It's definitely a challenge."

Since the 1990s, Gong said regulations have increased for X-rays, lab testing, dispensing medication, insurance company audits, and electronic health records.

75th Street Medical does not take insurance as a form of payment. Gong said he appreciates that most patients are paying

See GONG, Page 3

NEWSTRACKER

THE ISSUE

Blessing of the Combines

THE LAST WE KNEW

Snow Hill is the home of the Blessing of the Combines, which will take place Aug. 2 from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Admission is free. Free shuttle parking is at Byrd Park.

THE LATEST

Festivities begin with a parade, led by a horse-drawn combine, followed by antique tractors, garden tractors, an antique fire truck and combines of red and green. There will be a presentation of colors by the Snow Hill JROTC. The keynote speaker is Chuck Fry of the Maryland Farm Bureau.

WHAT'S NEXT

Exhibits and displays are set up along Green, Pearl and Bank streets, including a Petting Barnyard. Hayrides and pony rides will be available. At the river, Pontoon Boat Cruises are available and the Wheels That Heal Car Club will host a car show. For information, go to www.blessingofthecombines.org.

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INSIDE

Business	17	Obituaries	28
Classifieds	36	Shorelife	24
Education	23	Sports	32
Health	16	Voices	14

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ON THE COVER

Dr. Victor Gong splints the wrist of patient Sarah Sharkey at his 75th Street facility in Ocean City.
GRANT L. GURSKY PHOTO

Gong

Continued from Page 2

out-of-pocket, or even in cash, and for that reason he tries to maximize efficiency to keep prices low. His practice does take Medicare and workman's compensation. Records show Medicare paid him \$45,696.26 in 2012.

Gong's clinic sees 17,000 patients a year, with the bulk coming in summer months. He says the daytime is busiest; people want to get medical treatment, then get back to the beach.

He gets the most foot traffic in June and July, when high school grads descend on Ocean City by the thousands. Gong schedules his most experienced physicians for night shifts, when the injured teens most commonly arrive.

"They fall off their truck, they get a head injury," Gong said, "they don't want to tell their parents. They may be on drugs. Most of them are good kids. They're scared. We teach staff how to handle that scenario. That's one difference from a regular practice — a lot of moving parts."

In that demanding time, the 75th Street physicians will treat just about everything, from common ailments to serious injury, like sore throats and earaches, dislocated shoulders and fish hooks puncture wounds, even heart attacks. Having a fire station across the street helps, too, because paramedics can be over in minutes.

But sometimes, tourists come in, and are a lot more sick than even they knew. Gong recalled one patient who came to him with complaints of a persistent cough. The X-ray found a tumor.

Another time, a man in his 60s had driven several hours to visit the beach, and upon arrival came to see Gong for severe fatigue. He wasn't just over-tired from the drive; it turned out to be a form of leukemia. The man still comes back to see Gong every year to offer his thanks.

Gong says he's sympathetic to people who fall ill while on vacation. Moreover, he adds, tourists are conscious of their dollars; they're in a strange area, they may not always want to take the next step and visit a real emergency room.

"When you're in an unknown area, and you're sick, what do you do? We try to make it warm for them," he said. To that end, there are flat-screen TVs in every exam room, toys for kids, and bottles of water at the ready. Happy customers, Gong also says, are return customers.

At 58 years old, Dr. Gong moves with the energy of a man half his age. He talks with his hands, a lot. He still keeps his signature mop of shaggy black hair in a pageboy coif, though it's receded with age.

When he graduated from medical school, Gong got his start making house calls for an outfit in Brooklyn called Doctors On Call. He spent a few years practicing medicine in New Jersey and central Maryland before moving to Ocean City, to start his own house call busi-

ness at the beach. He called it Doctors Housecall Network. Gong went to people's homes to care for them, using a mobile X-ray unit and my his own computerized medical records system.

Before long, Gong moved into a commercial facility, a former law office at 75th Street, and within his first two years he bought the building outright. Gong eventually expanded to two more urgent care clinics at 125th Street in Ocean City, and to Ocean Pines. Both have since closed. Gong calls it a consolidation of his business. In recent years he's also dialed back closing time at 75th Street from 5 a.m. to midnight.

In the summer, Gong employs a staff of about 20 people. Recruiting is important, because it's still a seasonal job. He says he makes sure his seasonal docs are well-paid, and he puts them up for free for the season in their own Ocean City condo.

Gong says many doctors who do come to the beach to practice medicine are working for the local hospitals, and they get their med school loans repaid in exchange for working in what's still a rural area. Not me, Gong says, noting how he built his own business from the ground up, using his own money.

"They got paid, and loans forgiven, to work in Ocean City. I was a rare bird. I committed myself, and my money, to do this," Gong said. "You'll find less and less independent practitioners. Look at this area. I'm the only one in Ocean City who's the independent. The longest-surviving one. We've had a lot of competitors come and go."



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