

## The doctor, the lobbyist

From hospital to Hill, Thomas Metcalf puts his cause at forefront: children

By Carlos Mayorga :: The Salt Lake Tribune:: Article Last Updated: 09/11/2008 11:24:19 AM



Christian Spiker, 11, of Sandy, reacts to the burn of... (Leah Hogsten/The Salt Lake Tribune )

The boy won't open his mouth.

Pediatrician Thomas Metcalf tries again to carefully slide a tongue depressor under the 2-year-old's top lip, as the boy's mother cradled him on her lap.

Curious new instruments - from the over-sized popsicle stick to a stethoscope - put some children on edge.

But for Metcalf, the stick is not just a tool to check the back of a patient's throat: It's a way to a child's heart.

With the invasive peek finished, Metcalf pulls out a Sharpie marker and draws two big eyes and a happy smile on a suppressor. Now "Mr. Smile," the stick draws a grin from the boy, who reaches out for it.

Metcalf - recently named the winner of the 2008 Child Advocacy Award by the American Academy of Pediatrics - has done routine check-ups like this on children for 35 years. The need for tricks to get young kids to open up hasn't changed since he started working as a pediatric intern at the University of Rochester.

"It's a scary threat for them," he said, describing the challenges of treating kids ages 6 months to about 2 1/2 years old. "They recognize the doctor is not mom or dad or grandma - those people they are comfortable with - and they are not happy with the close contact with someone so unfamiliar."

Metcalf's love for children reaches far beyond his office at St. Mark's Hospital. The father of three has expanded his role as pediatrician to include serving as a child advocate, working to fight child abuse and lobbying legislators in both Washington and in Utah for universal health care for children.

"I totally believe pediatricians need to get out of the office and into the community," said Metcalf, who started lobbying for children in the '70s when his efforts helped bring about Utah's first seatbelt and car-seat legislation for children.

He will formally receive his child advocacy award at the American Academy of Pediatrics' national conference in Boston in October. This is not the first time Metcalf has been recognized for his work. In 2000, Voices for Utah Children named him Utah Child Advocate of the Year.

After graduating from Westminster College in 1965, Metcalf attended medical school at Stanford University and completed his pediatric internship at the University of Rochester. He also worked at the U.S. Navy Hospital in Tennessee before returning to Utah in 1975, where he worked in academic pediatrics at the University of Utah for 10 years before joining Wasatch Pediatrics.

Metcalf's life can be compared to a juggling act - balancing patient visits with his advocacy work with lawmakers and meeting with a number of child advocacy programs. Still, whether he is doing a routine checkup or treating pneumonia, giving patients his full attention is essential to healing, he said.

"You know he is just swamped," said Oyuki Spilker, of Sandy, whose 11-year-old son, Christian, sees Metcalf. "But when he comes in the room, he acts like he has all the time in the world."

Interacting with dozens of children on a daily basis is what helps fuel his advocacy work, Metcalf said.

He joined the board of the Utah Health Policy Project in 2007, a step that allows him to continue his commitment to securing universal health care for all children.

In the next few years, Metcalf hopes legislators begin to warm up to the idea.

"Every legislator in the state knows him," said Jeffrey Schmidt, Utah chapter president of American Academy of Pediatrics. "He stands out among pediatricians nationally, taking time outside of the office to lobby year after year because it's the right thing to do. He's been doing it so long relentlessly, tirelessly. Not many can do that."

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### **Know the doc**

\* **Name, age:** Thomas Metcalf, 65.

\* **Profession:** Pediatrician, St. Mark's Hospital.

\* **Recent honors:** 2008 Child Advocacy Award from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

\* **Education:** Westminster College; medical school at Stanford University; pediatric internship at the University of Rochester.

\* **Career:** U.S. Navy Hospital in Tennessee; academic pediatrics at the University of Utah; now at Wasatch Pediatrics.