

Horsetrack doctor treats all patients with respect, dignity

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



The Catholic health care system in Hot Springs is having a significant impact on the lives of stable workers at Oaklawn Park through the efforts of Dr. Kyle Roper of CHI St. Vincent.

Roper has a family medicine practice for St. Vincent, but each Tuesday and Wednesday, he spends a few hours at the track to care for the men and women who care for the horses that race at Oaklawn each December to May.

On a recent morning, Roper tended to more than 25 stable workers. He dedicates a two-hour block to meeting with patients — many of whom lack health insurance or a regular doctor due to the nomadic lifestyle of racing. He operates from a clinic located just outside the gates of the stable area.

“It means a lot to this community,” said Jeanette Milligan, executive director of the Arkansas Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association. “It’s helping the trainers by keeping their employees working, and keeping them working means them keeping a job. So, it’s all vital.

“Horses are seven days a week. There’s no days off, basically. They’ve got to be there to take care of the horses.”

Roper began volunteering his time to the stable area practice in 1998. The concept was founded after conversations between Oaklawn and the Arkansas HBPA, which represents racehorse owners and trainers.

"We started our clinic in the (racetrack) chapel, and we started in the halls because we didn't have a waiting room area or an examine room," recalled Roper, a 63-year-old native of Camden.

About a year after the program's launch, Roper was asked for his feedback by Eric Jackson, senior vice president of Oaklawn.

"I told him I loved it," Roper said. "He said, 'What do you love about it?' I said, 'It's me and my stethoscope and my otoscope, and the patients are so kind and nice. And we do it the old-fashioned way because we can't afford all the testing and everything else.' And so, it's been real ministry to me for many, many years."

Roper sees patients with a variety of needs.

"Coughs, colds, congestion, refills for medicines on diabetes and hypertension," he said. "I do see injuries, or follow-up of injuries, of horse bites, horse kicks, falls from horses. Just you name it. We see it."

There are also more severe cases that come through the clinic.

"Last year, this lady came having stomach pains," Milligan recalled, "and in about three minutes Dr. Roper told her, 'Go to the emergency room. Your appendix is going to burst.' She was in surgery within two hours, and they had it out and she was fine. He knew right away she needed to go."

In another instance, Roper sent a patient to the emergency room after he exhibited symptoms of a heart attack.

"If he sees something that he's very concerned about, he gets them all set up at St. Vincent," Milligan said.

Milligan said Roper treats each individual with exceptional dignity. On a recent morning, it was clear he sees tending to patients as a means of serving Christ.

"He treats every person who comes in here so kind," she said. "You could be coming from the barn and be filthy, but you just got here and he puts his arm around you, asks how you're feeling and what he can do. He does that for every single person."

The Arkansas HBPA picks up the tab for prescriptions and diagnostics for stable workers, as well as medical supplies. Oaklawn's recent expansion has included building a formal clinic for the program, with an exam room and waiting room.

Approximately 40 to 50 patients visit Roper each week. For the past 15 years, he's been assisted by nurse Becky Lambert.

Roper's title with the stable area program is backstretch medical director. It's a role he intends to continue in for the foreseeable future.

“The people are so kind,” Roper said of his patients. “They don’t expect a whole lot and anything I can do for them is a blessing.

“When I retire from my office practice, I’ll do this.”