

Treating the human condition



PHOTO: MEGAN MURPHY

David Galler has a tender touch and a whole lot of heart. Working as head doctor in Middlemore Hospital's intensive care unit, he sees it all.

He talks candidly to CAITLIN McGEE about family, politics and occupational hazards.

Nudity and anal-probing would be more of an occupational hazard than a highlight for most of us.

But for Dave Galler, head intensivist at Middlemore Hospital, it's one of the best parts of the job. "But I don't get to stick fingers up bums now. I delegate that job," he says with his tongue firmly lodged in his cheek.

"I always tell young medical students: It's a great job, you get to be ultimately voyeuristic and see people with their clothes off," he says, grinning.

But there is a serious touch to this humour that comes when life and death are part of the everyday work experience.

Dealing with the grotesque is all part of being a head doctor in the intensive care unit at Middlemore Hospital. He dealt with the lacerated victims of Antonie Dixon's P-fuelled samurai rampage, and a man who had half his face and arm removed from by the propeller blades of a helicopter.

It is common for Galler to be stopped from time to time by people he doesn't remember.

"I was at a parent teacher interview the other day and some woman came up to me and thanked me for saving her life!"

It's these parts of the job — the communication and interaction with people — that he finds very rewarding.

"He's a real communicator. He aggressively and actively seeks knowledge," says close family friend Paul Jeffery.

Jeffery says if Galler walks into a room and there is someone he wants to talk to, he bowls on up and starts a conversation.

His quest for medical knowledge started at the undeniably social Otago University. He then spent seven years in England in the 1980s, completing his specialist training as an anaesthetist before returning to New Zealand to complete further training as an intensivist.

A basic humanity and a common touch show through when Galler talks about his job. His descriptions are littered with observations of what takes place, watching people, talking to people and the strength that families and individuals show in the face of

pain or the death of their loved ones.

"The best part of the job is to see how people behave, mostly in adversity," he says.

Dealing with sick people is a source of admiration and inspiration. If he was dealing with crime and criminals, Galler says he might have a more cynical outlook on the world around him.

"It's quite an inspiring job...I suppose if I was in another job, I'd have a different view of life."

All of this is put into sharp focus by his other job as a health policy advisor to the government.

"You can take your job for granted for a while, but being away from home for a week half the time makes that side of the job become so much more enjoyable," he says.

For the past six years, Galler has been juggling two jobs. One week he is in Auckland working in the Middlemore intensive care unit. On alternate weeks he is in Wellington working with the government and consulting with district health boards about policies and ways to move the health system forward.

He says that incremental change is the best way to progress. Instead of aborting entire policies that are not working we should be dissecting the positive bits and abandoning the bad bits.

"The baby is always getting thrown out with the bathwater. And we certainly see that in health policies. I've seen a few instances where everything gets the chuck instead of incremental change, which is probably a much more sensible way to go.

"That's what needs to happen with the new government. I hope they are going to be brave enough to look at the system and be much more calculated about how they approach it."

Jeffery says this extra job reveals another side of Galler's personality.

"He gets to be a different kind of self. It massages his outgoing self, giving his opinion, talking, listening, and interacting."

Jeffery says Galler's friends were literally shocked that he got the job as an advisor because he had been very critical of previous governments.

"I think they felt he was a thorn in their side. He went public, which most

doctors don't usually do. I think he may have got a rap over the knuckles for it, but now this Government has grabbed him as an advisor."

The son of Polish-Jewish immigrants, Galler's father Anton emigrated to New Zealand after fighting for the Polish Army in World War II. His mother Zosia (Sophie), after experiencing Nazi cruelty while imprisoned in Auschwitz concentration camp, was orphaned and moved to Israel.

After moving to New Zealand, Galler's father trekked to Israel to find a wife. It was there that his mother and father would meet and marry. The couple settled in Wellington where they could begin a family and move on from the hardship of World War II.

Helping runs thick in the Galler vein. He credits his father with saving his mother's life and rehabilitating her after "all that war stuff".

"There's no doubt about it, he got my mother through that whole thing and turned her from being a bit of a wreck and a victim into a person who can move on. And he did that through being a really loving guy."

Part of the rehabilitation process was 15 years of correspondence between Anton and the German government. Anton insisted Zosia should be compensated for the trauma of World War II and her experiences in the Nazi concentration camps.

"It was a way of getting those skeletons out, instead of keeping them rattling around in the closet," says Galler.

This raw and basic notion of helping has obviously filtered down the gene pool. His big brother Les is also a head doctor in an intensive care unit at Auckland Hospital.

"I think Dave and I both grew up in a time when doctors were less technology driven," says Les.

"So we are able to step back and see how things affect the patient from a more emotive perspective."

Galler says he wasn't pressed into medicine by any outside influences apart from following his older brother. Les bore the brunt of their parents' ambitions for their children.

"They were desperate for him to do

well. It was much easier for me." If there was any medical influence in his life, Dave says it was following Les's lead.

"He's a smart guy my brother, he's an amazing doctor and he's really into it."

Paul Jeffery went to school with both brothers at Wellington College and recalls Les entering international quizzes on National Radio as a child. "Les was extremely bright as a kid. He had a huge general knowledge for a child."

But Galler was the all-rounder. "Dave was the sporty one, but he has a real hunger too."

A hunger for the health system to maintain and improve its current level of service. To do that, Galler says, there needs to be some inspired leadership

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within the public health sector where doctors feel like they are being listened to. At the moment, Dave says, many doctors have just checked out.

"The catch-22 of the medical system is that it needs the input of the dedicated people who are in it. But when doctors come out of specialist training and get their first job, they are incredibly dedicated and they work like hell.

"After a few years of busting their boiler they realise the quality work that they have put in to change the direction and the service in the hospital isn't being listened to."

Dave says the disillusionment arising from this gives doctors one of two options: "They either check out mentally and just come in and do the nine to five job, or they go into private medicine and they are lost.

"I think all those doctors and nurses in private medicine are like individual power generators but none are hooked up to the national grid."

"Private medicine is a bit of a cancer in that sense," he says.

Luckily, for the majority of New Zealanders who cannot afford private healthcare, this is a doctor with the combination of desperately needed skills, huge humanity and a public service ethos whose power generator *is* hooked up to the national grid.