

The kids are alright: Northampton Area Pediatrics founder, Peter Kenny, reflects on 40 years of care



Dr. Peter Kenny does a wellness check-up with Memet, 3, and Memet's mother, Zumray Tonak. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



Dr. Peter Kenny at Northampton Area Pediatrics in Amherst. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



Dr. Peter Kenny does a wellness check-up with Memet, 3, and Memet's mother, Zumray Tonak. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



Dr. Peter Kenny does a wellness check-up with Memet, 3, and Memet's father and mother, Ertugrul Ahmet Tonak and Zumray Tonak. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



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NORTHAMPTON — When Peter Kenny first moved to Northampton, he expected a temporary stay while his wife finished graduate school and he worked in a local emergency room.

When he started a solo pediatrics practice in 1978, he also assumed that the business would remain relatively small in size.

Instead, Kenny's solo practice grew into Northampton Area Pediatrics, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in August and currently sees 13,000 patients.

But in 1978, Kenny was the only doctor in his 2,000-square-foot office space, vacuuming the floors and watering the plants outside of his "busy from day one" practice, he said. Within the first three years, Kenny added two partners to keep up with demand.

"It was exhilarating," Kenny said. "We would be seeing patients here but also going back and forth to the hospital very frequently, through the day and the night. It was exhausting but exhilarating, just totally absorbing."

The Northampton office has remained in its original location on Locust Street, but it has since grown to occupy over 10,000 square feet; there's also an office in Amherst. As a whole, the practice has seen an increase of 5,000 patients over the past 10 years.

After four decades, Kenny said that he will be "cutting back," but not retiring.

"I will be taking a lot more time to travel and see my grandkids and that type of thing," Kenny said, "so I'll be working here on a basis of helping out in ways different than I have before."

"One of the ways is that, if I've known somebody for a long time, even if I'm not here continually for them, I'm still available to add to the conversation if it's helpful for any child, any need," he continued.

Kenny has become a familiar face to many local families, sometimes extending beyond childhood.

"It's fun on this end because the kids you took care of 40 years ago, 30 years ago, 20 years ago are coming with their own kids," Kenny said.

In his 40 years with Northampton Area Pediatrics, Kenny said that practices have evolved significantly with medical, technological and social advances.

In 2016, the practice joined the Boston Children's Hospital Pediatric Physicians' Organization, which Kenny called a "huge change."

"We have at our fingertips the ability to access the records of our children or at (Boston) Children's Hospital to speak to specialists at Children's right away, to get kids in," Kenny said. "It's a great relationship."

In recent years, the practice has also added an in-house lactation consultant and parent-education groups on topics such as toddler behavior and ADHD.

David Steele, a pediatrician and managing partner at Northampton Area Pediatrics, said that recognizing social and mental health issues during childhood has become increasingly prevalent, which has made prescribing psychiatric medication a more common part of the job.

While the safety pamphlets he once handed out to parents used to include advice on wearing seatbelts in the car or a helmet while riding a bike, he added, modern pamphlets now include information on topics such as cyber-bullying and video-game addiction.

“The good news is that we look at those as opportunities ... We like those challenges, but they definitely are a lot of what we’re doing,” Steele said.

“As the world has changed, the burdens on families and children have changed,” Kenny added.

“The isolation, the bullying, social media — all of these represent problems that can all be addressed and be solved,” he added. “The kids are going to be fine, the trick is to be there in ways that they need as they’re negotiating growing up.”

It’s a complicated, but ultimately better world, Kenny said. While other authority figures in society have “lost credibility,” he added, “I think a constant has been the local community pediatrician’s office ... I think we’ve absorbed some of the credibility that has been lost in places.”

Steele noted that medical advances such as vaccines have led to a dramatic decrease in infectious diseases among children, and that new treatments have allowed children faster recoveries.

“We’re taking care of a kid who was diagnosed with meningitis, who, when I started, would have been in the hospital for 14 days straight,” Steele said. “He was there for three days, and now he’s getting outpatient therapy, and we’re finishing that up in the office.”

But aside from the many changes, essential aspects of the practice have remained the same.

“It has always been and remains a privilege to take care of their kids and families,” Kenny said. “That’s the core message. And I think everybody who works here feels that. People come in with this child, the most important person in their lives, and they trust us to do a good job. It’s amazing.”

This trust between the pediatricians and parents is essential, said Kim Brewer, practice administrator at Northampton Area Pediatrics.

“They’re a rock to us parents as we navigate the new world,” Brewer said. “New parents especially.”

Although Kenny will be stepping back, he said that he does not feel any pressure to retire.

“Age is a number,” he said. “Everybody feels different about what they’re doing.”

And for Kenny, the ability to reduce his workload while remaining present in patients’ lives is another benefit of changing times.

“In the previous world, someone would either be working or they’d be retired,” Kenny said. “It’s a binary. I don’t think it has to be that way. I don’t want to stop having fun.”

Jacquelyn Voghel can be reached at jvoghel@gazettenet.com.