

Hospital Heartaches

Even at night doctors continue to help and sometimes lose patients

Lindsey J. Mastis
Daily Egyptian

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the sixth in a series of seven stories that focus on individuals who dedicate their days to sleep and their nights to work. They work midnights, the graveyard shift, and these stories will explore the makings of bartenders, dancers and hospital workers once the sun goes down.

It is nearly 8:30 p.m. on a Monday when Dr. Darlene Lutchka gets the chance to rest in a vacant room on the second floor of Memorial Hospital of Carbondale. She clocked in at 9 a.m., but her day isn't over yet.

—Beep!

Her pager goes off.

"Code blue," she says as she rushes to a phone and begins dialing.

—Beep!

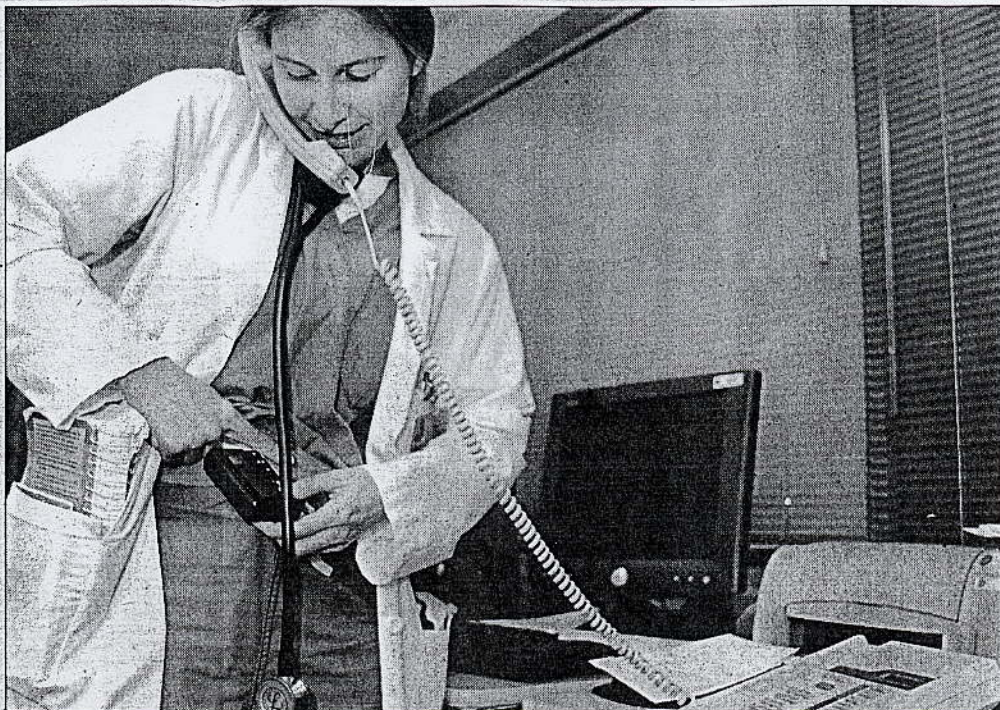
Her pager goes off again. She walks briskly through the deserted and dark halls to the other end of the hospital. There, she finds a room full of doctors gathered around a patient, struggling to keep the person alive. She squeezes through the door and becomes lost amongst her peers in a sea of blue scrubs as the nurses stand outside the door, alarmed and intent.

The hospital is virtually empty except for emergency and overnight patient care



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Lutchka, who was on call Monday evening, fills out admissions forms on the first floor of Carbondale Memorial Hospital as nurses rush around her. Admissions are the main task throughout the evening, which wake her if she gets the rare moment to sleep.



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Darlene Lutchka, first-year-resident, phones Carbondale Memorial Hospital's emergency room after receiving a second page for a 'code blue.' Lutchka rushed to the first floor to observe while E.R. doctors aided a patient.

areas, so everyone's attention is focused on the room.

Lutchka, a graduate of University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana and its medical school on the Rockford campus, is a first-year resident on a surgery rotation. She has been awake since at least 8 a.m.—later than usual—and she will sleep periodically until her day ends as another is just beginning at 7:30 a.m. But the long hours and working through the night are not what bothers the 32-year-old Carbondale resident, who sometimes starts her shift as early as 5 a.m.

"When you have to pronounce the patient [dead]—that's never fun," she said. "That bothers you, even if it's an expected thing."

Lutchka's voice echoes in the hall as she walks back to the private room.

"That was not a happy ending," she said.

But she is gaining experience in more than treating sick patients and coping with sleep deprivation. Six days a week, Lutchka does patient admissions, makes patient phone calls, pronouncements and her favorite, Caesarean sections.

"Delivering babies is a lot of fun," she said.

She has helped deliver nearly 30 babies so far, and she hopes to continue helping with the joy of life. But working

in a hospital, especially during the night, is not always a positive experience.

"The bad days are when you're on service and you get here at 5 a.m., end at 7 p.m. and then you're on call and you don't get any sleep and then you start the next day all over again at 5 a.m.," she said. "That's when everybody's cranky."

Although it fluctuates, when Lutchka knows she'll have some time to refrain from work, she escapes to a vacant room. Upstairs is a series of locked rooms that look like a row of closets. They contain a bed, television, dresser and bathroom, but the room is not much bigger than a closet.

"It's challenging and you learn so much and you realize how much you don't know," she said. "That is the challenge of medicine, but you never get used to being sleep deprived and being tired all the time."

Lutchka sleeps and eats when she can, but she maintains that no matter how hard her job can become, she sees people every day who are a lot less fortunate.

Her least favorite part of her job is trying to cope with and help others cope with young, terminally ill patients.

"It's hard when you've exhausted all your resources and that's not good enough," Lutchka said. "But I guess that

just goes to show you that there's a limit to everybody's capacity and the rest is in God's hands."

Even though it seems as if she is the only person awake in the world, on an empty floor in a dark hospital, she knows she is not alone.

Lutchka's husband is also a doctor and works in the same hospital. They both spend most of their time helping others, but they do get time off to stay at their Carbondale home with three Labradors named Athena, Artemis and Zeus. She loves Greek mythology and the water. They ski and go boating. Eventually, they would like to have children.

But right now Lutchka continues to help people at a time when there is no one else around to help.

"If there's one profession that you can really feel like you're making a difference, I think medicine is it, because even very simple things like the flu, if you catch it early enough, you can treat somebody's symptoms and reduce them by a day or two and they're just really happy," she said. "There's a lot of people down here that I've noticed who really appreciate every effort that you make."

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