



# THE LAST COUNTRY DOCTOR

Dr. John Rugge retires after 46 years of caring for patients, a practice he maintained even as he built the nation's leading network of rural health care centers

By Anthony F. Hall

John Rugge did not become a physician in order to preside over a network of health centers; if anything, he built the network to provide his patients with better care.

Three years ago, he stepped down as president and CEO of Hudson Headwaters Health Network, which operates 19 health centers in Warren, Clinton, Essex, Hamilton, Saratoga and Washington counties.

This past month, he announced that more than forty-five years after graduating from Yale School of Medicine and seeing his first patients in Chestertown, he will cease practicing medicine.

"Stepping back as the CEO of the Network was no problem. But I could not think of anything more difficult than telling my patients that I would no longer be there for them. It's hard for me as well. My purpose for nearly 50 years has been caring for people," he said.

Because of the outsized role that Hudson Headwaters has played in the way rural populations receive

health care, serving as a model and case study not only for New York State but the nation, it is easy to forget that John Rugge is first and foremost a family physician; in many ways, a country doctor.

He comes by that title honestly; his mother's father was indeed a country doctor; an uncle was a surgeon.

"There is a family heritage. My mother could recall going out on house calls with her father, in a sleigh pulled by a team of horses. She loved to tell the story of the farmer who called the house at 5 am, telling the doctor he had to come right away. When he got to the farm, his patient appeared at the door with his wife and a suitcase in his hand and said, 'we have to get to the train station. I didn't know who else to call.' That's the kind of role a doctor can expect to play in a small community," said Rugge.

By the early 1970s, solo practitioners like Rugge's grandfather were few and far between and growing ever more scarce.

In Adirondack towns like

Chestertown, North Creek and Warrensburg, physicians were retiring or moving away.

Rugge happened to be living in Johnsbury, completing his first book, "The Complete Wilderness Paddler," when Chestertown lost its last physician.

Rugge was planning to return to Albany Medical Center to continue his training; instead he accepted an offer from Chestertown's Supervisor and Town Board to open a clinic.

As Rugge recalled in the letter to his patients announcing his retirement, "The Chester Health Center was just weeks away from opening. I happened to stop by to check on the construction when a fellow came in gasping for breath—a bad asthma attack. Fortunately, a shot of adrenalin proved more powerful than all that dust in the air, and this person, my first patient, at a health center that became Hudson Headwaters, made a nice recovery. That was forty-six years ago this October."

Rugge intended to stay in the area for no more than six months. But

he went on to open health centers in Warrensburg, North Creek and Indian Lake - wherever there was a need and community support. When the network was established and federal funding arrived, health centers opened in Bolton and other towns.

"My patients were memorable. I diagnosed one patient with severe respiratory problems by going out to his car. He had no muffler; he was suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning. I ran into a woman a few years ago who had been brought to me as an infant by her mother after she had turned blue. Decades later, she's a grown woman who has survived," said Rugge.

Asked how a relatively inexperienced physician was able to treat so many patients, with so many different conditions, some of them life-threatening, Rugge replied, "I was young and brash. And as one radiologist told me, 'you're better than nothing.' But the truth is, I was immersed in a medical community that was ultimately very supportive. Emergency Room physicians were

my partners. I was never alone."

Rugge estimates that he is currently responsible for roughly 800 people.

"People who came to me as 40-year-olds are now my 85-year-olds," he says.

Rugge says his patients form the basis of everything he knows about how to deliver health care to underserved areas, his specialty; this is the knowledge he brings to the rooms where health care policy is debated and ultimately made.

"I sit on councils and commissions with people with backgrounds in policy or administration. I come with stories about patients. My hope is my clinical experience contributes something to the discussion that one more academic study or policy paper can't," he said.

In the end, caring for patients and building a network of health centers are not that different, Rugge said.

"I serve by being a doctor. Creating the network was a way of serving more people, and perhaps in a somewhat different way, but serving nonetheless," said Rugge.

Clockwise from left: Dr. John Rugge is the co-author of two books, one about wilderness paddling, the other about paddling through one of North America's last unexplored wilderness tracts. Dr. John Rugge in the 1970s with the late Chris Leary, a Physicians Assistant who served Hudson Headwaters for 30 years. A 2014 groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the new Warrensburg health center. It was first housed in an A&P grocery store and plaza built in the mid-1960s, which was converted to a health center in 1976. Rugge guiding US Rep. Elise Stefanik through the Broad Street health center in 2018.

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