Medical Directory 2025

A special supplement to
The Courier Herald



Dr. Adam Kachelman has been with the Medical Center in Dublin since August 2023. The Alabama native was drawn to Laurens County's smalltown charm/**KYLE DOMINY**

'We wanted a small town'

Kachelman settling into role at Medical Center

By KYLE DOMINY
Stafff Writer

Dr. Adam Kachelman was used to small towns.

The 35-year-old physician had grown up in a quiet community northeast Alabama, near the Tennessee state line. His work as a doctor had landed his family in Ocala, Florida, in densely populated Marion County, and by 2023 he was ready to take up roots for somewhere more quiet and closer to family (his wife is from Virginia).

"We were looking to move closer to family and we wanted a small town," he said during a recent conversation in his office at the Medical Center. "I was looking for a new job and I got this email from a recruiter, and I decided to look into it."

That email regarding a position at the Medical Center led to Kachelman's first visit to the area. He had never been in Dublin before, but he liked what he saw.

"Every step of the way we were impressed with what we saw," he said. "The people were nice, welcoming and kind, even the people who didn't have anything to do with the Medical Center, and that was a bit of a change from what we were used to for a few different years. That was one of those things, we wanted a good place to raise a family. You want good people not just around you, but your kids."

In August 2023, Kachelman joined the ranks of physicians at the Medical Center, and his family – spouse Jessie and children Emily, Elle and Miles – have settled into their new hometown.

The biggest perk of practicing medicine in a small town, he said, is being able to get to know his patients personally, which helps him navigate their healthcare needs.

"You can see patients walking through Kroger or (places) like that. You get to see more of people and how they are doing in their regular life," he said. "When you are in a bigger town, a bigger city, it's harder to really get a feel for what individuals are going through, because everyone's life is so different, but in a smaller town, people are very similar and cross paths a whole lot more, so it's a lot better for that one-on-one connection and building relationships."

Kachelman credits his older brother for inspiring his desire to become a doctor and when starting his studies in medicine, he initially wanted to specialize in orthopedics. He had worked in sports training in high school and was interested in becoming a surgeon. He graduated from medical school from Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine in Virginia. However, after watching doctors connect with their patients while training, he was drawn to the variety that comes with general practice.

"As a surgeon, you just kind of see people asleep," he said. "I learned about myself, that I like variety. I don't want to be doing the same thing over and over again. That gets tedious and so doing general practitioner care, you see whatever comes through the door."

When not seeing patients in the office on Hillcrest Parkway, Kachelman stays busy with his family. In his little free time he dabbles with cars, guitars and reading. They attend the Dublin Bible Church.

"I feel like I'm fitting in well with the clinic, and we're finding our niche here in Dublin," he said.



Kachelman grew up in a small community in Alabama and was looking to move back to a smaller town after working in Florida/**KYLE DOMINY**

Veteran cardiologist moves practice to Dublin

By KYLE DOMINY
Staff Writer

When having a heart attack, time is of the essence. For years, heart attack victims outside of big cities, particularly in rural areas like Middle Georgia, would have to travel a great distance for the lifesaving care necessary.

Among the physicians helping bridge that healthcare gap and provide better care for such patients is Dr. Surender Malhotra. Malhotra has worked nearly 20 years in Middle Georgia and has helped save many lives along the way.

"A heart attack is when one of the arteries is blocked," he said recently. "When you can open it up, it is the most gratifying thing in medicine, because you know you saved somebody's life. If you weren't there that patient may have died of a heart attack."

In September 2024, Malhotra opened a full-time local practice, Cardiac Care Specialists of Dublin. The veteran doctor had been working at a practice in Macon since 2008 and has seen patients in a Dublin satellite office and performed procedures at Fairview Park Hospital since 2011, so he is no stranger to area's patients and hospital staff.

"My partners retired, and I thought that I would just make the move," he said of the decision to work solely in Dublin. "I like the community, I like the hospital and the staff, so I made the change. There's only one hospital here. In Macon you lose a lot of time going from one to the other. I can come to one hospital and take care of everything."

Malhotra's journey to become a cardiologist began in his native India, where he attended medical school. He completed his residency in New York and began his career as a primary care physician. However, he wanted to be a specialist, and as advancements in heart care and treatments emerged and became widely available, he was drawn to cardiology.

"Primary care is very broad, and I wanted to be in a specific field. I saw in front of my eyes how heart catheterization, angioplasty and stents evolved, and I wanted to do that," Malhotra said. "Before we didn't have much for when people had a heart attack. People would suffer for several days and then slowly get better, and a lot of people died from heart attacks. Then we developed these procedures where we discover where the blockage is, we can open up the blockage and save their life and even improve the quality of their life."

Heart catheterization is the procedure of searching the heart for blockages or other irregularities in the heart. Angioplasty is the process of clearing blockages and usually involved the installations of heart stents, a metal mesh tube designed to help prevent the artery from closing again. Though researched for decades, these operations did not become available until the 1970s and 1980s. For years the procedures were only available at large hospitals. Doctors and researchers continue to make advancements in the field and ways to make the procedures widely available.

Malhotra studied cardiology in Augusta and trained in Michigan before joining the practice in Macon.

Though happy to bring his skills to a rural area, Malhotra encourages people to take care of themselves and take steps to prevent heart troubles.

"See your primary care physician regularly. Get your blood work done. If you have high blood pressure or diabetes, take them seriously. If you get these things under a certain level, we know there is less chance of having a heart attack or having a stroke," he said. "People have to exercise, stay away from too much fast food and eat a good diet. All these things translate into a better quality of life."

When not seeing patients in his office at 202 Fairview Park Drive or at the hospital, Malhotra said he likes to watch sports and Netflix. He's also training for a half-marathon.

"I preach every day," he said. "I tell patients they have to exercise, so I better practice what I preach."



Dr. Surender Malhotra recently moved his practice to Dublin fulltime. The veteran cardiologist performs procedures at Fairview Park Hospital/KYLE DOMINY

Compassion and its role in palliative healthcare

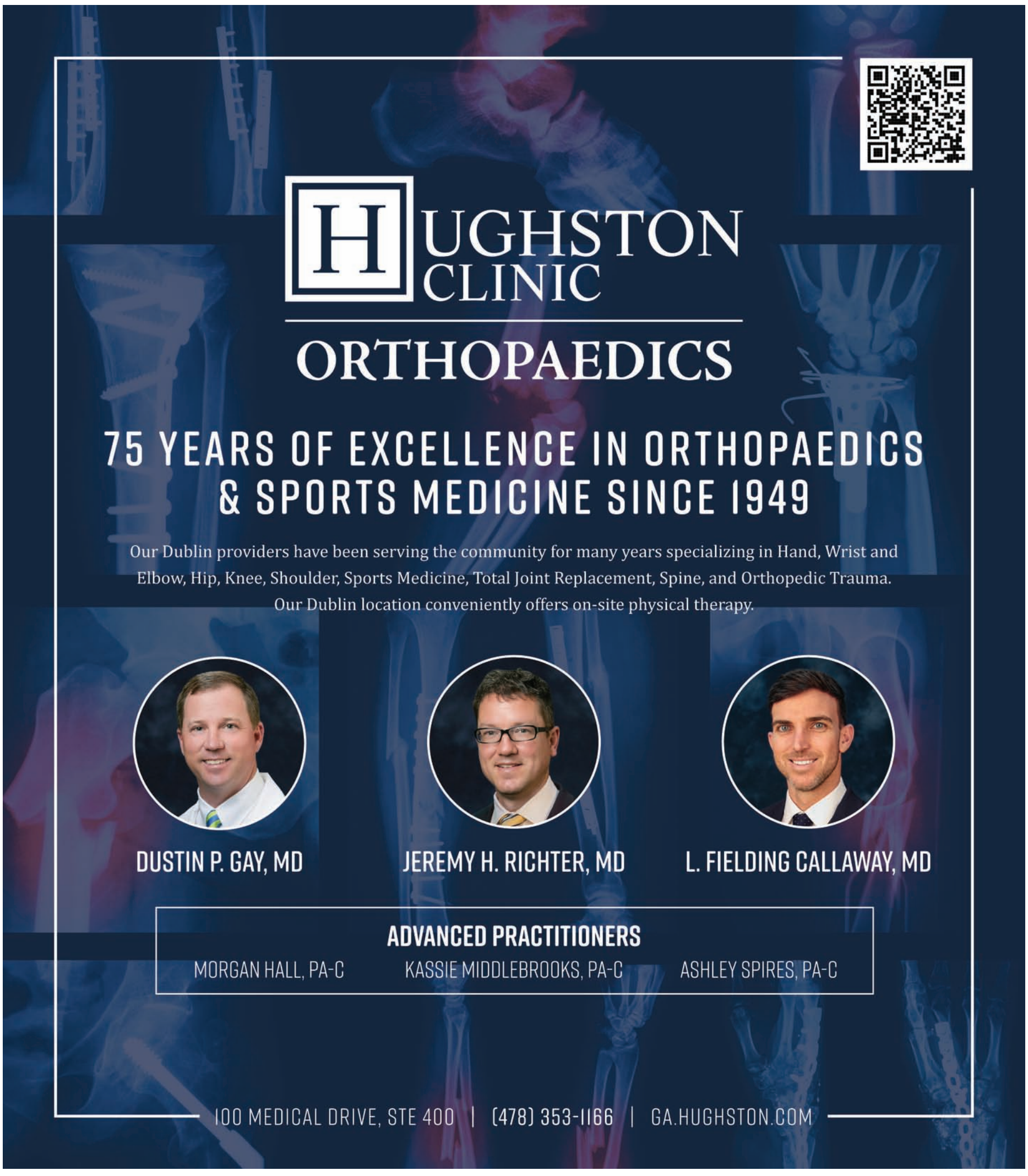
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

Various medical and therapeutic treatments are designed to promote health and well-being. Many of these therapies attempt to remove illness or address sickness. But at some point in their lives, people may receive a different form of care known as palliative care.

Palliative care, according to Get Palliative Care, is based on the needs of the patient and not the patient's prognosis. Unlike curative treatments that aim to eliminate illness, palliative care is centered on improving quality of life for patients and their families by addressing physical, emotional and psychological needs. Palliative care focuses on comfort, care and quality of life for those with serious illness. It is designed to improve life for people of any age who need it, not just older adults. The National Institute on Aging says palliative care is interdisciplinary, which means it involves a variety of doctors and care providers who work together with patients and families to address individual goals and values.

Palliative care prioritizes comfort and support, aiming to alleviate pain, manage symptoms and offer holistic care that encompasses the whole person. Some of the hallmarks of palliative care are relief from pain and other symptoms of a serious illness. It also may help a person cope with side effects of medical treatments. Palliative care may be recommended whether a con-

COMPASSION
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What adults should know about alcohol consumpton after 50

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

Patients are asked several routine questions during annual wellness exams. Among those queries are a subsection of questions regarding alcohol consumption. Doctors ask these questions to identify how much alcohol their patients consume and how often they drink. It's important that patients of all ages answer such questions honestly, and that includes men and women over 50.

Binge drinking may not be a behavior people associate with individuals over 50, but this behavior is on the rise among aging men and women. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines binge drinking as a pattern of alcohol consumption that elevates an individual's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 percent or higher. The NIAAA notes that such levels correspond to consuming five or more drinks (male) or four or more drinks (female) in a roughly two-hour period. Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicates that one in five adults between the ages of 60 and 64 and 12 percent of individuals age 65 and over report current binge drinking.

Binge drinking trends among individuals 60 and over alarm public health officials. The NIAAA notes that older adults are vulnerable to various problems when drinking alcohol, which can lead to bad interactions among people taking medications and increase risk for various health ailments. Such a reality makes it worth aging adults' time to learn some of the basics of alcohol consumption after 50.

• Alcohol can exacerbate various medical conditions. Age is a notable risk factor for various medical conditions. For example, the National Institute on Aging notes that changes in the heart and blood vessels that occur naturally with age may increase a person's risk of heart disease and related health problems. The NIAAA notes that adding alcohol to the mix as you age can worsen problems such as high blood pressure and congestive heart failure. Additional conditions that can be exacerbated by heavy drinking include diabetes, liver problems, osteoporosis, and mood disorders.

• Alcohol can interact with various medications. Prescription medications come with a lengthy rundown of warnings and instructions, which is enough to compel many people to avoid alcohol when taking such medicines. However, people may not be as careful with over-the-counter medications, even though the NIAAA warns that mixing alcohol with OTC medicines can be dangerous and even deadly. OTC medications such as aspirin, acetaminophen, allergy medicines, and sleeping pills can interact badly with alcohol.

• Alcohol consumption should be limited to two drinks or less. As noted, a significant percentage of adults over 60 qualify as binge drinkers. That may alarm some older adults who do not feel as though they have a problem with alcohol but still meet the qualifications for binge drinking. Refraining from alcohol is arguably the safest option, but individuals over 50 who still like to enjoy a drink every now and then are urged to keep their consumption to two drinks or less in a day for men and one drink or less in a day for women. It's important that individuals recognize they cannot save up drinking for one night of the week. So those who abstain six days a week cannot then consume between seven and 14 drinks on the day they drink. Such an approach is unhealthy, unsafe and potentially deadly.

Adults over 50 are urged to learn about the ways alcohol affects aging bodies. More information is available at niaaa.nih.gov.



Studies suggest that binge drinking is on the rise among men and women over the age of 50. Alcohol consumption can have detrimental effects on your health/SPECIAL PHOTO

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COMPASSION

Continued from page 2

dition can be cured or not. It is performed alongside other treatments a person may be receiving, says the Mayo Clinic.

Patients with serious illnesses often experience pain, nausea, fatigue, and shortness of breath. Palliative care specialists utilize strategies and medications to alleviate these symptoms, ensuring that patients remain as comfortable as possible. Some of the conditions for which palliative care can be effective include:



- Cancer
- Heart disease
- Blood and bone marrow disorders
- Dementia
- Cystic fibrosis
- Kidney failure
- Lung disease
- Liver disease
- Stroke

According to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, patients with serious illnesses who received palliative care lived longer than those who did not receive this care. By focusing on relief and support, palliative care helps individuals and their families confront challenging times.

Those who would like to inquire about palliative care for themselves or a loved one can search the Palliative Care Provider Directory to find options nearby. A conversation with one's doctor also can point patients in the direction of palliative care.

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Salty Halo offering halotherapy and PEMF Therapy in Dublin

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

Salt therapy, now called "halotherapy," has been used in Europe since the 1800s and is now popular in the U.S. for its health benefits. At Salty Halo, Light Sound & Respiratory Spa, a 15-minute session in a salt booth, disperses medical-grade dry salt micro-particles into the air, which can be particularly effective for those with respiratory conditions like asthma, allergies, bronchitis and COPD.

Dry salt particles have antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties and are highly absorbent. When inhaled, they cling to foreign elements, helping to clear the respiratory system of allergens and toxins while thinning mucus for easier expulsion. Dr. Norman Edelman of the American Lung Association notes that these fine salt particles draw moisture into the airways, alleviating conditions like asthma. A cleaner respiratory system enhances oxygen intake, supporting better immunity and energy levels.

In addition to respiratory and immune health benefits, smaller salt particles promote detoxification and absorb bacteria and impurities on the skin, which can alleviate issues like acne, psoriasis, and eczema. This therapy offers a complementary treatment that can work alongside conventional health care and current health habits to improve overall well-being. Halotherapy provides health benefits and a unique and restful sensory experience. At Salty Halo, the tranquil atmosphere softly lit with gentle music creates a soothing environment that fosters relaxation and stress reduction, contributing to improved health of the nervous, lymphatic and immune systems.

Alongside halotherapy, Salty Halo proudly offers PEMF Therapy, expanding the journey to wellness and rejuvenation.

PEMF therapy (pulsed electromagnetic field) is not new; it is more of a well-kept secret that Salty Halo wants to share with everyone! There is nothing to lose and so much to gain. Each session lasts 30 minutes and leaves you feeling relaxed and rejuvenated.

1. Reduction in inflammation

Inflammation is the body's natural self-protection response, primarily involving white blood cells that fight infections caused by bacteria and viruses. However, it can also occur without these pathogens, often due to autoimmune responses where the immune system attacks itself. One of the key benefits of PEMF therapy is its ability to re-energize damaged cells and reduce inflammation, promoting the body's natural healing processes at the cellular level.

2. Improved circulation

PEMF therapy may enhance blood circulation by reducing friction and resistance in narrow capillaries through energized particles oscillating in response to frequency.

3. Injury recovery & wound healing

PEMF therapy improves blood oxygenation, speeds up the healing process, and reduces recovery time by about one-third on average.

4. Pain reduction

This therapy may generate micro-currents in neural pathways, blocking pain signals and providing relief, often starting in just minutes.

5. Sleep and relaxation

PEMF therapy can help with insomnia and stress by promoting muscle relaxation and potentially lowering blood pressure significantly, leading to deeper sleep.

6. Depression and anxiety

While professional treatment is essential for mental health issues, PEMF therapy can be a valuable complement. Studies suggest it may enhance oxygenation and affect brain areas linked to mood regulation.

7. Increased energy

PEMF therapy can lead to a chain reaction of benefits—better circulation, improved sleep, and reduced pain—which collectively increase energy levels.

8. Bone mending

FDA-approved PEMF therapy is effective for treating non-union fractures and accelerates the healing of bones and soft tissue.

9. A companion modality

PEMF is safe, non-invasive, and has no harmful side effects. It can enhance various treatment regimens, providing substantial benefits without interfering with existing therapies. Always consult your doctor before adding it to your routine.

10. Immune boosting

Good health relies on proper care, diet, and exercise. PEMF therapy helps recharge cellular energy, promoting optimal cell function and supporting a healthy immune system. Integrating it into your health routine might be one of the best decisions for overall wellness.

These benefits make PEMF therapy a great complementary treatment—it supports rather than interferes! Consult your doctor, then call Salty Halo to incorporate PEMF therapy into your regimen; there is nothing to lose.

Salty Halo, Light, Sound & Respiratory Spa is located at 907 Hillcrest Pkwy, Suite E, Dublin, proudly offering halotherapy, PEMF therapy and red-light therapy alongside clean, safe and non-toxic skincare products.

Important wellness exams after 50

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD



Seniors are a growing and increasingly prosperous demographic. As the senior population increases, a greater emphasis must be placed on keeping aging individuals healthy. Wellness checks are important at any age, but they bear even more significance as individuals grow older.

Age brings with it many things, including experience and wisdom. But age also brings an increased risk for health problems. Aging men and women are vulnerable to chronic conditions like heart disease, COPD, cancer, and arthritis. It's noteworthy that many chronic health conditions fail to produce any symptoms until they have progressed to a point where treatment is difficult.

Annual wellness exams can help older adults take charge of their health and stay as healthy as possible. It's possible for a person to preserve his or her health (and possibly life) through check-ups and easy tests. Here are some common screenings and health recommendations that come up in the prime of one's life.

· Colorectal cancer screening: A colon cancer screening is recommended for everyone at age 45. Colon cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States, and risk increases at age 45. Although people seldom look forward to a colonoscopy and the required prep, putting off this test due to a little discomfort may result in missing colon cancer at its earliest stage when it is most treatable.

· Cholesterol screening: This simple blood test can help evaluate the risk for heart disease. High cholesterol can contribute to the buildup of plaque in the arteries, making them narrower and less flexible, according to Sharecare, Inc.

· Mammogram: Most health organizations recommend annual mammogram screenings from age 40 until menopause. Then it may be possible to have a mammogram every other year for those who are at average risk. It is important for women to discuss mammogram frequency with their doctors, particularly if there is a family history of breast cancer.

· Diabetes: ChenMed says diabetes may be more common in older adults, so regular screenings for this illness can enable early diagnosis and management.

· Testicular cancer screening: This test generally is not recommended without symptoms. Some organizations suggest men with a family history or other risk factors consider performing self-examinations.

· Vaccination needs: Doctors can alert patients to recommended vaccinations during wellness exams. Seniors should receive an annual flu shot and updated COVID-19 vaccination as available. Pneumococcal vaccine can protect against pneumococcal disease that can lead to pneumonia, meningitis and bloodstream infections. Adults over 50 also should receive a vaccination for shingles, which can occur in older age in those who have previously experienced chickenpox.

There are additional advantages to routine health checkups. Doctors can inquire about fitness routines, stress, sleep, and diet to see if patients are within the guidelines for healthy living.

Older age may make a person wiser, but the risk for various health issues and certain diseases increases with age. Routine health check-ups can keep doctors and patients on the same page.







Senior Living ... where you always feel 'at home'

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

At Home Senior Living is located in the small rural town of Cochran, Georgia, just a short distance from Laurens County. Glenn Sawyer and Shanna Dupree, the owners, came together in early 2019 and built this elegant community, which our residents call "home." They had one desire then, and it remains the same desire today ... to provide a home for the elder members living in Middle Georgia.

At Home has been a sanctuary and a wonderful place for many to call home. Since opening in 2019, it has provided a permanent home to more than 200 residents. It has been a blessing not only for residents, but also for their families and caregivers. As one family member recently said, "It has been a blessing to know my mom is safe, well cared for, and more socially engaged than when she was living alone."

At Home features 32 assisted living suites, 16 memory care suites referred to as our "Cottage" suites, and 8 independent living suites. Several unique aspects set us apart from other assisted living in the area. Notably, we are the only community in Laurens and Bleckley counties that offers an all-inclusive rate for assisted living and memory care. What does this mean? It means that all care, utilities, laundry services, housekeeping, Wi-Fi, cable, meals, and activities are included in one comprehensive rate. At Home maintains a low staffing-to-resident ratio with a full-time licensed RN on staff and available 24/7.

We love hosting a variety of events throughout the year, including its Georgia Bulldog tailgate party, the annual Barbie party, Shark Week celebrations, birthday celebrations and decking the At Home halls at Christmas time with residents and residents' families. Additionally, we enjoy monthly outings to a different restaurant, making each month special and memorable.

Every resident is here to embrace life and live it to the fullest, and staff members at At Home are dedicated to providing the highest quality of care while ensuring residents have fun and enjoy their days. Our mission speaks for itself: "We will deliver quality and compassionate care to a generation who tirelessly gave to us."

There are several ways to visit At Home community. Tours are always welcomed by reaching out to community relations drector Kim Hall at (478) 271-4663. She will arrange a convenient date and time. People also are encouraged to visit the facility's Facebook page, "At Home Senior Living" where you will see residents' social life on a daily basis. Last but not least, people are invited to go to YouTube and search "Why Choose AHSL" and you will automatically be directed to a virtual tour of the beautiful and spacious community. Seeing is believing.

Since opening its doors in 2019, At Home has been truly blessed. It is our heartfelt prayer that God will continue to bless us as we strive to be a blessing to others in need.

Innovative healing at Rehab Advantage

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

At Rehab Advantage and Sports Medicine in Dublin,we are proud to be leaders in rehabilitation technology. Our latest addition, the state-of-the-art Class 4 LightForce Laser, is transforming how we treat injuries and manage pain. This innovative therapy provides effective, non-invasive pain relief and accelerates the healing process, helping our patients return to their active lifestyles quicker than ever.

The Class 4 LightForce Laser utilizes advanced laser technology to penetrate deep into tissues, promoting cellular repair and reducing inflammation. This cutting-edge equipment effectively addresses a wide range of injuries and diagnoses, including:

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- Sports injuries
- Sciatica

Patients frequently report pain relief with the first session. LightForce Laser is an effective treatment option for those suffering from chronic pain or recovering from injuries. The laser therapy works by increasing blood flow to the affected areas, enhancing the body's natural healing processes, and stimulating collagen production, which is crucial for tissue repair.

Unlike traditional pain management techniques, Class 4 laser therapy is non-invasive and free from the side effects often associated with medications. This makes it an ideal choice for individuals seeking a safe and effective alternative to manage their pain and promote healing without the risks involved with pharmaceuticals.

At Rehab Advantage and Sports Medicine, our dedicated team of professionals is committed to providing personalized care tailored to each patient's unique needs. We understand that every-individual is different, and we take the time to create customized treatment plans that align with specific goals and conditions. We invite you to experience the transformative effects of Class 4 LightForce Laser therapy at our facility. Take the first step towards a pain-free life and reclaim your mobility. Don't let pain hold you back any longer! Call our office today at (478) 275-1800 to schedule your appointment and receive a comprehensive evaluation. Discover how our innovative treatments can help you regain your strength, mobility, and overall quality of life.

Join the many satisfied patients who have found relief and reclaimed their active lifestyles at Rehab Advantage and Sports Medicine. Our team is here to support you on your journey to recovery, utilizing the latest technology and evidence-based practices to ensure the highest quality of care.

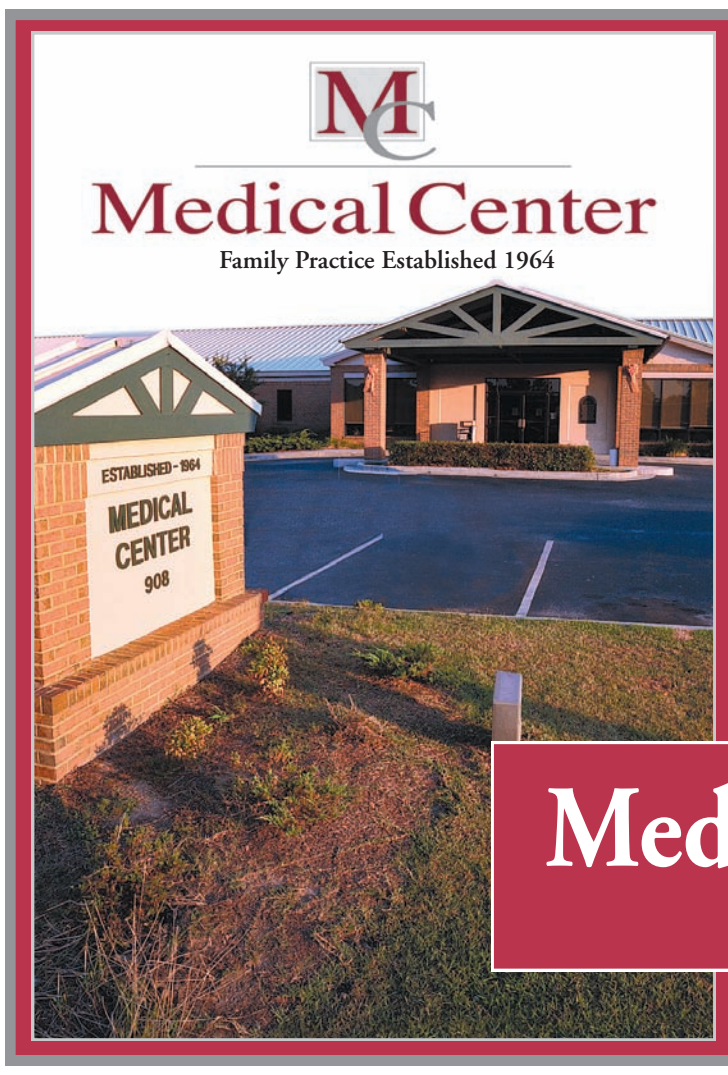
About Rehab Advantage and Sports Medicine Rehab Advantage and Sports Medicine is a leading provider of rehabilitation services dedicated to helping individuals recover from injuries and improve their physical performance. Our experienced therapists are committed to utilizing the latest technology and techniques to deliver effective treatment and support.

What happens to blood after its donated?

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER HERALD

Each year blood donors help to save millions of lives. Individuals who routinely donate blood may not give it a second thought, but this selfless gesture ensures accident victims and others get a helping hand when they need it most. Recipients of blood donations are there for the culmination of a process that begins with generous donors, who may be curious about exactly what happens to their blood after it's collected. According to the American Red Cross, donated blood is kept on ice before being taken to a processing center, where information about the donation is scanned into a computer database. Upon arriving at processing centers, donated blood is spun in centrifuges to separate it into transfusable components, including red cells, platelets and plasma. Each component is then packaged as a "unit," or a standardized amount doctors use when transfusing a patient. Blood donations also are tested at a separate laboratory to establish type and check for infectious diseases. The results of these tests are transferred electronically to the processing center within 24 hours, which underscores the efficiency of the donation process. Any blood that tests positive for disease is discarded and donors are notified. If the blood is deemed suitable for transfusion, it is labeled and stored. Red cells are stored in refrigerators at 6° C for up to six weeks (42 days), while platelets are stored at room temperature in agitators for up to five days. Plasma can be stored in freezers for up to one year. Blood is available to be shipped to hospitals 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and hospitals typically keep some blood units on-site.





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PBM math: Big chains are paid $23.55 to fill a blood pressure Rx. Small drug stores? $1.51

By ANDY MILLER
KFF Health News

CUTHBERT, Ga. — While customers at Adams Family Pharmacy picked up their prescriptions on a hot summer day, some stopped in for coffee, ice cream, homemade cake, or cookies.

It wasn't a bake sale, but the sweets bring extra revenue as pharmacist and co-owner Nikki Bryant works to achieve profitability at her business on the town square.

Bryant said she is doing all she can to bolster it against a powerful force that threatens her and other independent pharmacists: the middlemen who manage virtually all prescriptions written in the U.S., called pharmacy benefit managers, or PBMs. Serving as brokers among drugmakers, pharmacies, and health insurers, these health care entities have drawn scrutiny from Congress, the Federal Trade Commission, and state legislatures for their role in the increase in drug prices.

Bryant and other independent pharmacists say PBMs not only create higher costs but also make it harder for patients to access medications. So they were hopeful about state legislation this year that would have increased their reimbursement to match the average prices paid to retail chain pharmacies through the state employee health plan. But Gov. Brian Kemp vetoed the bill.

Kemp cited a fiscal estimate that it would cost the state as much as $45 million a year and said "the General Assembly failed to fund this initiative."

Underlining the Georgia legislative reform effort against pharmacy benefit managers was an analysis by the American Pharmacy Cooperative, which represents independent pharmacies, that reviewed the price differential paid to a north Georgia pharmacy and nearby chain stores.

The analysis early last year showed chains were paid well beyond the family business for many of the same medications: For example, the chains received an average of nearly $54 for the antidepressant bupropion, while Bell's Family Pharmacy in Tate, Georgia, got $5.54, the analysis said. For a drug used to treat blood pressure, amlodipine, chain pharmacies received an average of $23.55, while Bell's got $1.51.

Bell's Family Pharmacy closed last year.

"The differences in Georgia are unbelievable," Antonio Ciaccia, who runs Ohio-based consulting firm 3 Axis Advisors. "If you're a pharmacist, you don't have any control over which drugs you dispense and which you don't."

By controlling prices and availability, pharmacy benefit managers cause patients and employers to spend more for medications, according to the Federal Trade Commission and pharmacy groups. On Sept. 20, the FTC sued three of the largest PBMs — CVS Health's Caremark, Cigna's Express Scripts, and UnitedHealth Group's Optum Rx, which together control about 80% of U.S. prescription drug sales. The agency said they created a "perverse drug rebate system" that artificially inflates the price of insulin. Each company denied the allegations.

The lawsuit followed a scathing FTC report in July that said the "dominant PBMs can often exercise significant control over which drugs are available, at what price, and which pharmacies patients can use to access their prescribed medications."

The trade group that represents PBMs, the Pharmaceutical Care Management Association, said the insulin market is working well and blamed drugmakers for historically higher prices of the medication.

Bryant and other independent pharmacists, though, say they lose money filling certain prescriptions while reimbursements favor chain pharmacies like CVS that have corporate ties to pharmacy benefit managers. And even the chain pharmacies have retrenched, with CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens announcing layoffs or store closures in recent months.

"PBMs are like the mafia," Bryant said. "They pay us what they want to pay us. They are sucking all the money out of health care."

Pharmacy benefit managers will charge some health insurance plans more for a medication than what they reimburse a pharmacy, keeping the extra money as profit, critics say. This practice is known as "spread pricing." Large PBMs also take money from drugmakers as a "rebate" to give their drugs preferential treatment on health plans' lists of medications, independent pharmacies say. And by favoring certain pharmacies with whom they have business ties, experts say, these drug brokers help force independent stores such as Bell's to close.

The veto by Kemp, a Republican, came despite the GOP-led General Assembly voting overwhelmingly for Senate Bill 198 on the last day of last year's legislative session.

Kemp spokesperson Garrison Douglas said, "The governor remains entirely and wholeheartedly supportive of Georgia's independent pharmacists and the need for PBM transparency."

In his veto message, Kemp voiced support for a study of independent pharmacy drug reimbursements and PBM practices. And he said independent pharmacists are getting an extra $3 dispensing fee this year on state employee prescriptions.



Adams Family Pharmacy in Cuthbert, Georgia, and other independent pharmacies lose money filling many prescriptions while payments often favor chain pharmacies such as CVS that have corporate ties to pharmacy benefit managers, says Adams co-owner Nikki Bryant/**ANDY MILLER, for KFF Health News**

The state Department of Community Health, which oversees the State Health Benefit Plan, told KFF Health News that CVS Caremark, the PBM handling the state employee business, supplied the cost estimate Kemp used to justify his veto.

Fiona Roberts, a spokesperson for Community Health, said the department didn't have time to conduct its own analysis.

CVS Caremark said it used historical claims data to calculate the cost impact of the higher reimbursement.

Nationally, criticism of PBM practices intensified over the summer with the Federal Trade Commission report.

The Pharmaceutical Care Management Association pushed back, saying the report "is based on anecdotes and comments from anonymous sources and self-interested parties and supported only by two cherry-picked case studies that are implied to be representative of the entire market."

Members of both parties in Congress have tackled PBM reform. House members recently introduced another proposal, known as the Pharmacists Fight Back Act, which supporters say would add transparency, limit costs for patients, ensure they get the benefit of drugmaker discounts, and protect their pharmacy choices.

The consolidation that has combined health insurers with PBMs — including their operating their own retail, mail-order, and specialty pharmacies — has created financial behemoths, said U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, a Georgia Republican and a pharmacist. "I'm interested in busting them up," he said.

Alexander Oshmyansky, co-founder of Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drug Company, said the PBMs siphon off about a third of the $400 billion a year spent on pharmaceuticals.

"What we could do as a society with $100 billion as opposed to paying some companies to process drug payments," Oshmyansky said.

PCMA, the trade group, cited a report funded by the three biggest pharmacy benefit managers that said their operating margins are less than 5%.

And the group says that discussions about congressional reform "reflect a one-sided view informed directly by the pharmaceutical industry's blame game designed to vilify PBMs to keep prescription drug prices high and increase drug company profits."

Underpayments by PBMs, however, have accelerated the closures of mom-and-pop pharmacies across the country, said the National Community Pharmacists Association, which represents independent pharmacies.

The U.S. loses almost one such pharmacy a day, said Anne Cassity, a senior vice president of the association. Rural pharmacies, which are hard to reach for patients lacking transportation, are especially vulnerable, she said.

Bryant's two pharmacies deliver to several counties, including to patients who have a disability or no transportation. The cost to patients: zero.

Most states have passed some version of oversight or restrictions on pharmacy benefit managers.

In Montana, state officials have collected financial reports from pharmacy benefit managers over the past two years after passing a bill to promote transparency in these businesses.

Data from 2022 shows that rebates in Montana rarely are directly returned to people buying prescriptions. Instead, they're pocketed by the PBMs or returned to health plans.

Josh Morris, who owns three independent rural pharmacies in southwestern Montana, said his pharmacies have seen reimbursement rates for medications bought under PBM-managed plans drop.

Morris said his business routinely either breaks even or loses money. "Our plan is that once we reach a certain level of cash, that we will be out," Morris said. "As in 'closed.'"

Frank Cote, with Montana's insurance commissioner's office, said that the state has tried to make business easier for small pharmacies but that state officials still don't control how much PBMs pay. Cote said the state will look for ways within existing rules or future legislation to support rural pharmacies.

Following Kemp's veto in Georgia, the pharmacy pay differential sparked criticism from an unusual place: within the board of the state Department of Community Health, the agency that runs the State Health Benefit Plan.

Mark Shane Mobley, a board member, said at an August meeting that independent pharmacies' pay in the state employee plan should be on par with a chain's. The PBM profit "is going to line people's pockets that are far outside of the state," said Mobley, president of Avilys Sleep & EEG, a Georgia provider of sleep disorder and electroencephalogram testing. "Our independent pharmacies, they're hiring people locally. They're taking care of the local community."

Community Health Commissioner Russel Carlson said the agency has an ongoing dialogue with CVS Caremark, the PBM handling the state employee plan medications.

"We don't have our head in the sand. We know there are some frustrations out there that exist in this space," he said. "But we ac-

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Childhood vaccination rates, once strong, slip

By DANIEL CHANG & SAM WHITEHEAD
KFF News

Jen Fisher can do only so much to keep her son safe from the types of infections that children can encounter at school. The rest, she said, is up to other students and parents in their hometown of Franklin, Tennessee.

Fisher's son Raleigh, 12, lives with a congenital heart condition, which has left him with a weakened immune system. For his protection, Raleigh has received all the recommended vaccines for a child his age. But even with his vaccinations, a virus that might only sideline another child could sicken him and land him in the emergency room, Fisher said.

"We want everyone to be vaccinated so that illnesses like measles and things that have basically been eradicated don't come back," Fisher said. "Those can certainly have a very adverse effect on Raleigh."

For much of Raleigh's life, Fisher could take comfort in the high childhood vaccination rate in Tennessee — a public health bright spot in a conservative state with poor health outcomes and one of the shortest life expectancies in the nation.

Mississippi and West Virginia, two similarly conservative states with poor health outcomes and short life expectancies, also have some of the highest vaccination rates for kindergartners in the nation — a seeming contradiction that stems from the fact that childhood vaccination requirements don't always align with states' other characteristics, said James Colgrove, a Columbia University professor who studies factors that influence public health.

"The kinds of policies that states have don't map neatly on to 'red' versus 'blue' or one region or another," Colgrove said.

Advocates, doctors, public health officials, and researchers worry such public health bright spots in some states are fading: Many states have recently reported an increase in people opting out of vaccines for their kids as Americans' views shift.

During the 2023-24 school year, the percentage of kindergartners exempted from one or more vaccinations rose to 3.3%, the highest ever reported, with increases in 40 states and Washington, D.C., according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. Tennessee and Mississippi were among those with increases. Nearly all exemptions nationally were for nonmedical reasons.

Vaccine proponents worry anti-vaccine messaging could accelerate a growing "health freedom" movement that has been pushed by leaders in states such as Florida. Momentum against vaccines is likely to continue to grow with the election of Donald Trump as president and his proposed nomination of anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Pediatricians in states with high exemption rates, such as Florida and Georgia, say they're concerned by what they see — declining immunization levels for kindergartners, which could lead to a resurgence in vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles. The Florida Department of Health reported nonmedical exemption rates as high as 50% for children in some areas.

"The religious exemption is huge," said Brandon Chatani, a pediatric infectious disease doctor in Orlando. "That has allowed for an easy way for these kids to enter schools without vaccines."

In many states, it's easier to get a religious exemption than a medical one, which often requires signoff from a doctor.

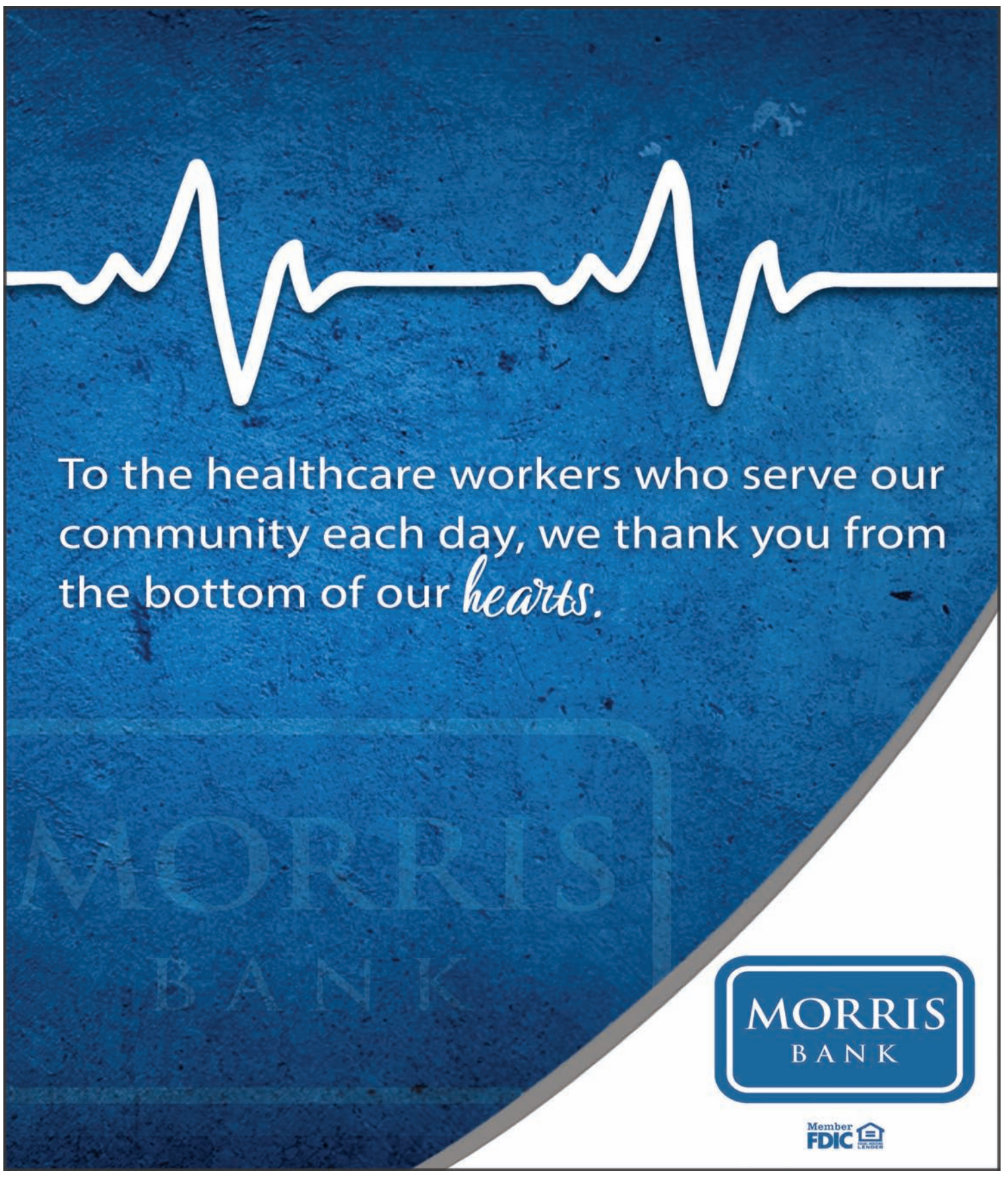
Over the past decade, California, Connecticut, Maine, and New York have removed religious and philosophical exemptions from school vaccination requirements. West Virginia has not had them.

Idaho, Alaska, and Utah had the highest exemption rates for the 2023-24 school year, according to the CDC. Those states allow parents or legal guardians to exempt their children for religious reasons by submitting a notarized form or a signed statement.

Florida and Georgia, with some of the lowest reported minimum vaccination rates for kindergartners, allow parents to exempt their children by submitting a form with the child's school or day care.

Both states have reported declines in uptake of the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine, which is one of the most common childhood shots. In Georgia, MMR coverage for kindergartners dropped to 88.4% in the 2023-24 school year from 93.1% in 2019-20, according to the CDC. Florida dropped to 88.1% from 93.5% during the same period.

Andi Shane, a pediatric infectious disease specialist in Atlanta, traces Georgia's declining rates to families who lack access to a pediatrician. State policies on exemptions are also key, she said.





RX COSTS

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knowledge that we do have contractual responsibilities."

In Cuthbert, Bryant said she can make more profit on cake and coffee than with many medications.

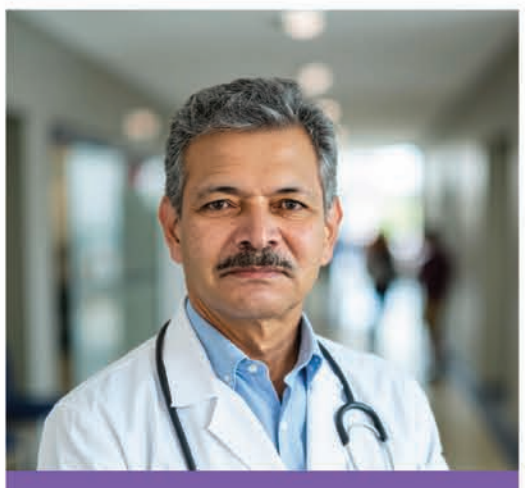
Still, she's in business while a nearby CVS pharmacy closed recently. "We outcompeted them on service," Bryant said.

Montana correspondent Katheryn Houghton and senior correspondent Arthur Allen contributed to this report.



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