

'Old-fashioned' doctor recalls career filled with births, broken bones and a muddy Labrador retriever

Dr. Alex Ashenhurst has spent more than 41 years practising medicine in Halton Hills.

Photo by
Ted Brown

LISA TALLYN
Staff Writer

It was the opportunity to set broken bones, deliver babies and do just about everything else in between that attracted a young Dr. Alex Ashenhurst to town nearly 41 years ago.

And it was that variety that kept Ashenhurst thoroughly enjoying practicing as a family doctor here right up until his retirement late last year.

Many friends, family and patients got together at an open house recently celebrating the long-time family doctor's many years of service to the community.

"He served the community and his patients with caring and compassion and made many friends while doing so," said Dr. Robert Bourns of Georgetown. "He earned the friendship and respect of his colleagues as well."

Before making the move to Georgetown in July 1966 Ashenhurst worked for a year for a doctor in Port Credit but says he didn't care for the "snotty clientele" there, so when the opportunity arose to take over Dr. Claude William's practice in Georgetown, Ashenhurst jumped at the chance to work in the small farming community.

"Coming out of school you are really keen," says Ashenhurst, who graduated from the University of Toronto medical school in 1964. "(In Georgetown) you could do just about anything you wanted— all the broken bones you wanted to fix and deliveries, everything. That's what I really liked."

With the move to Georgetown, Ashenhurst, a city boy, learned he actually had some roots in the area, as his great-grandfather had lived in Ashgrove and much of his family is buried in Norval.

He says one of his earliest memories of his career here was of a house call he made to the home of a patient who remembered his great-grandfather.

"He said, 'he was a miserable son of a bitch'. I'll never forget that," says Ashenhurst with a laugh.

House calls were common when the young doctor first started in Georgetown.

"House calls on the farm were a challenge because there was always a family dog that would come running out. I would hold my bag between myself and the dog."

He says he was still doing the occasional house call up until two years ago.

Middle of the night deliveries and 80-

hour workweeks were also a way of life for Ashenhurst and the other eight or so doctors in town, including Dr. Alistair McIntosh and Dr. Alan Thompson (who was his mentor), when he began his career. Ashenhurst considered the schedule a breeze, however, after logging 115 hours each week as an intern.

Many of Ashenhurst's patients have been with him right from the start.

"You get really attached to these patients," says Ashenhurst, who says it is the people and the humour that he misses most since retiring.

"They all have a story, good stories and bad stories." And many of them saw him as a sounding board for their problems, something he never minded at all.

"My 30-second lesson in being a psychotherapist is you never give anybody advice and you ask them irritating questions they have to answer themselves."

He has many fond memories of his patients.

He remembers one well-respected but "crusty" judge who came in one day with a peculiar rash on his leg.

"I said, 'Do you play golf?'"

He said, 'Yes.'

"Have you been playing recently?"

'Yes', he said.

"Had you hit a ball into the rough?"

He gave me a dirty look and said, 'Yes.'

I said, 'Sir, you have poison ivy.'"

He also remembers the husband of another patient who pulled up in an expensive car at his home one weekend while Ashenhurst was doing yard work, his mud-covered Labrador retriever by his side.

The man insisted Ashenhurst come to his home to give his wife a shot for a migraine she was suffering from.

Ashenhurst says he didn't think it was appropriate and suggested he take her to the hospital instead, which did not impress the man.

He says at that point he looked over at the man's car, and sitting in the front seat was Ashenhurst's mud-covered dog with his tongue hanging out ready to go for a ride.

"He (the man) was having a fit because my muddy dog was all over his front seat. It was poetic justice," says Ashenhurst.

In all, Ashenhurst estimates he's delivered about 1,000 babies, some of whom are children of the babies he delivered ear-

lier in his career earning him the title of grand-doctor.

He stopped delivering babies about seven years ago.

"I personally felt I

was losing my edge," says Ashenhurst, who may have inherited his desire to be a doctor from his father and namesake, also a doctor, who practised out of their home in Toronto. Both his mother and sister were nurses.

"His office was in the house. The front hall was the waiting room."

Working in the emergency department at Georgetown Hospital was one of Ashenhurst's favourite jobs.

"You never knew what would come walking through the door."

There were often drunks and victims of accidents and fights.

"Most of the fights came out of the old Hollywood (bar) in Norval. The parking lot at the Hollywood was probably one of the most dangerous places in the country."

He is proud of the fact Georgetown Hospital was one of the first to have a sexual assault kit— assembled by the staff there.

Ashenhurst, who divorced several years ago and is the father of two adult sons, has seen many changes in the practice of medicine over his more than 40 years as a family doctor.

They include a move from doctors setting their own fractures to sending their patients directly to orthopedic surgeons, the advent of the paperless office and the introduction of Family Health Networks, something Ashenhurst avoided joining.

"It's hard to change and I've been doing

things the same old way for years and years and I knew my end (as a doctor) was coming," says Ashenhurst when asked why he chose not to join a network.

The doctor shortage is another change he has witnessed.

He believes the shortage is due in part to the fact that approximately 60 per cent of the students in medical schools today are women who don't want to work full-time when they graduate and take time off for maternity leave.

He also says young doctors today don't want to work the 70 to 80-hour weeks he and his colleagues did when they started, which he doesn't blame them for.

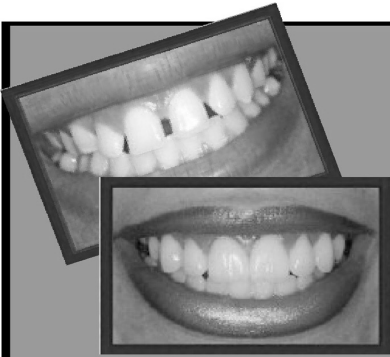
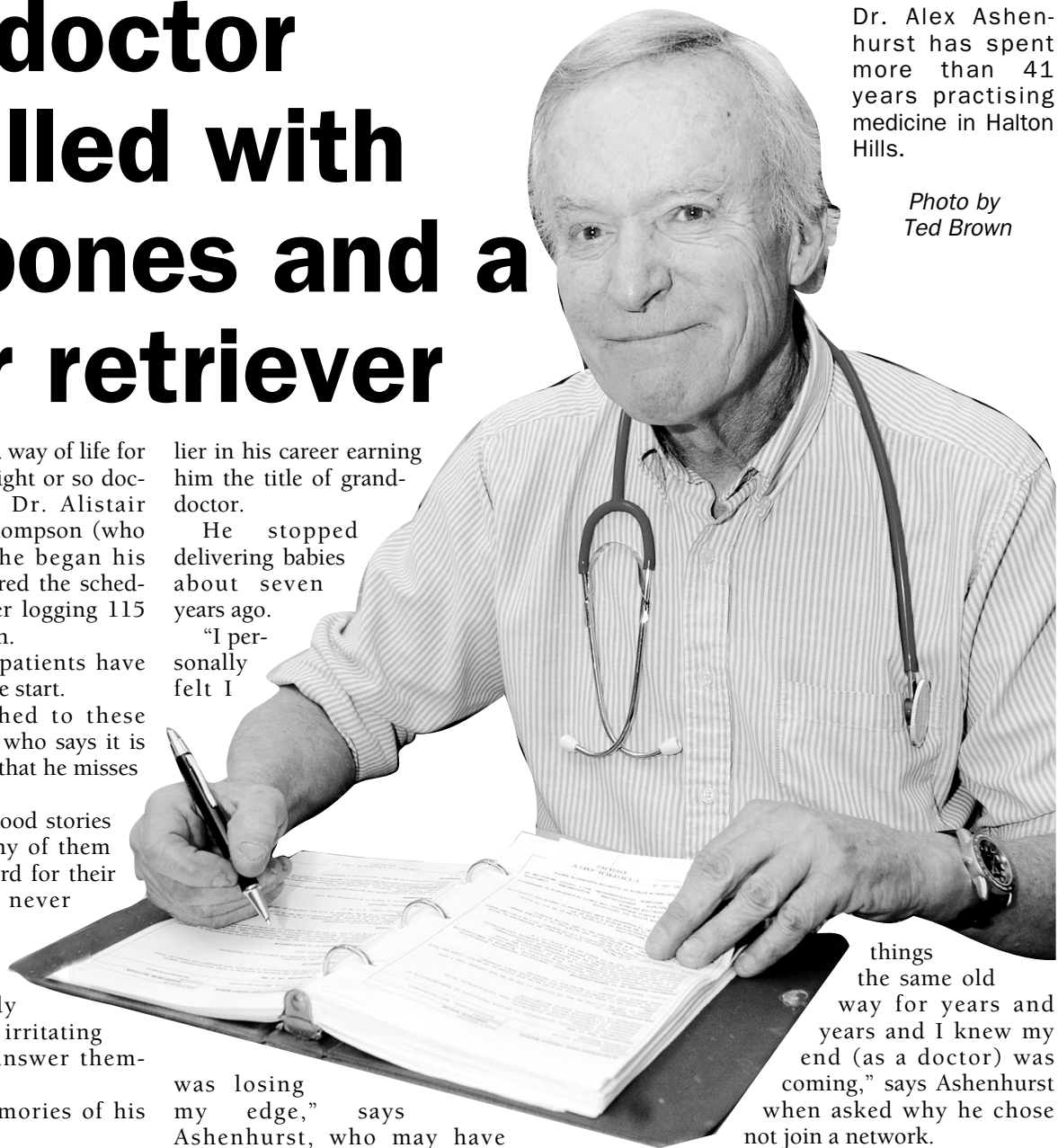
"That was ridiculous. I think they're sensible," he says.

While Ashenhurst is enjoying his retirement he hasn't had much time to actually relax, as since he left his practice he has been working steadily assisting the surgeon mostly on orthopedic joint replacement surgeries in Etobicoke, Brampton and Georgetown Hospitals.

"But when I go home its done. I don't have to worry about some patient's hemorrhoids or some poor young thing that's stressed out. That's great."

That leaves him the time to do other things he enjoys like minor renovations to his home, and planning trips to Alabama for some golf with friends, and camping and fishing with his brother.

(Lisa Tallyn can be reached at ltallyn@independentfreepress.com)



ZOOM TOOTH WHITENING SYSTEM

Shade changes of 6 to 10 shades in about an hour



your smile
says so much.

Cosmetic Dentistry

22 Guelph Street
downtowngeorgetowndental.com

(905)877-4371