

ER DOC KEEPS IT COOL

• COVER STORY BY CHRIS TRABER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SJOERD WITTEVEEN •

As cool and comforting as the underside of a pillow, Dr. David Austin has the ideal temperament for a difficult job.

It's said that if you're unfortunate enough to be in his ER, you'd be lucky to be attended by the veteran specialist, who has spent the past 16 years of his 25-year career as chief of emergency medicine at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

"He manages life threatening situations brilliantly and he's very calm," said Pauline Brillinger, patient registration and fast track clinic manager.

"Dr. Austin is extremely knowledgeable," offered acute medical systems director Molly Court, a colleague since the hospital opened in 1990. "He's a calming influence on the team and patients. He's not only extremely competent, he's compassionate."

Heady endorsements, undoubtedly deserved like his responsibilities, are accepted in stride.

With years of emergency medicine experience, the Toronto-born married father of two demonstrates a refreshing, almost blasé attitude reserved for the supremely confident, gifted and accomplished.

"You name it and we've dealt with it," said the physician in his quiet, modulated tone. "You think of stuff that's hard to believe and we've seen it. Some gruesome stuff too."

Needing to make sense of turmoil and wanting to ease patients' fear and suffering is a prerequisite for emergency professionals, he says.

"Chaos and crisis management are ways of life for us. You never know what we're going to deal with. The only thing the people who come here have in common is that they weren't planning to be here."

That, nonetheless, is the life he always sought and continues to cherish.

"I always had an interest in science and how it could help people. Medicine was a good fit for me," he said.

After earning his medical degree at the university, young Dr. Austin completed post-graduate studies in emergency medicine at London's University of Western Ontario.

"I started in general surgery, but it wasn't the lifestyle I wanted to embrace," he recalled. "My personality, as such, is that I like the immediate gratification of a situation, deal with it and move on. Emergency medicine appealed to me as both a job and lifestyle."

When Markham Stouffville Hospital opened, Dr. Austin was brought on board as the first chief of emergency.

"We're still not one of the busiest ERs around compared to St. Mike's and Sunnybrook, but there's a significant increase in the number of visits and the acuity of patients. The population is aging and ambulances arrive from other communities."

With growth comes demand — and challenges.

At peak periods, a pair of physicians, approximately 10 nurses plus support staff tend to dozens of patients, each of

whom, according to Dr. Austin, believes their case should be a priority.

"Getting people who need to be admitted is a challenge," Dr. Austin said. "As long as there are inpatient beds, it flows well. When there aren't any, which is frequently, we keep patients on our 20 ER stretchers. That creates a ripple effect."

Wait time issues, or "crowding" as it's known in ER vernacular, continue.

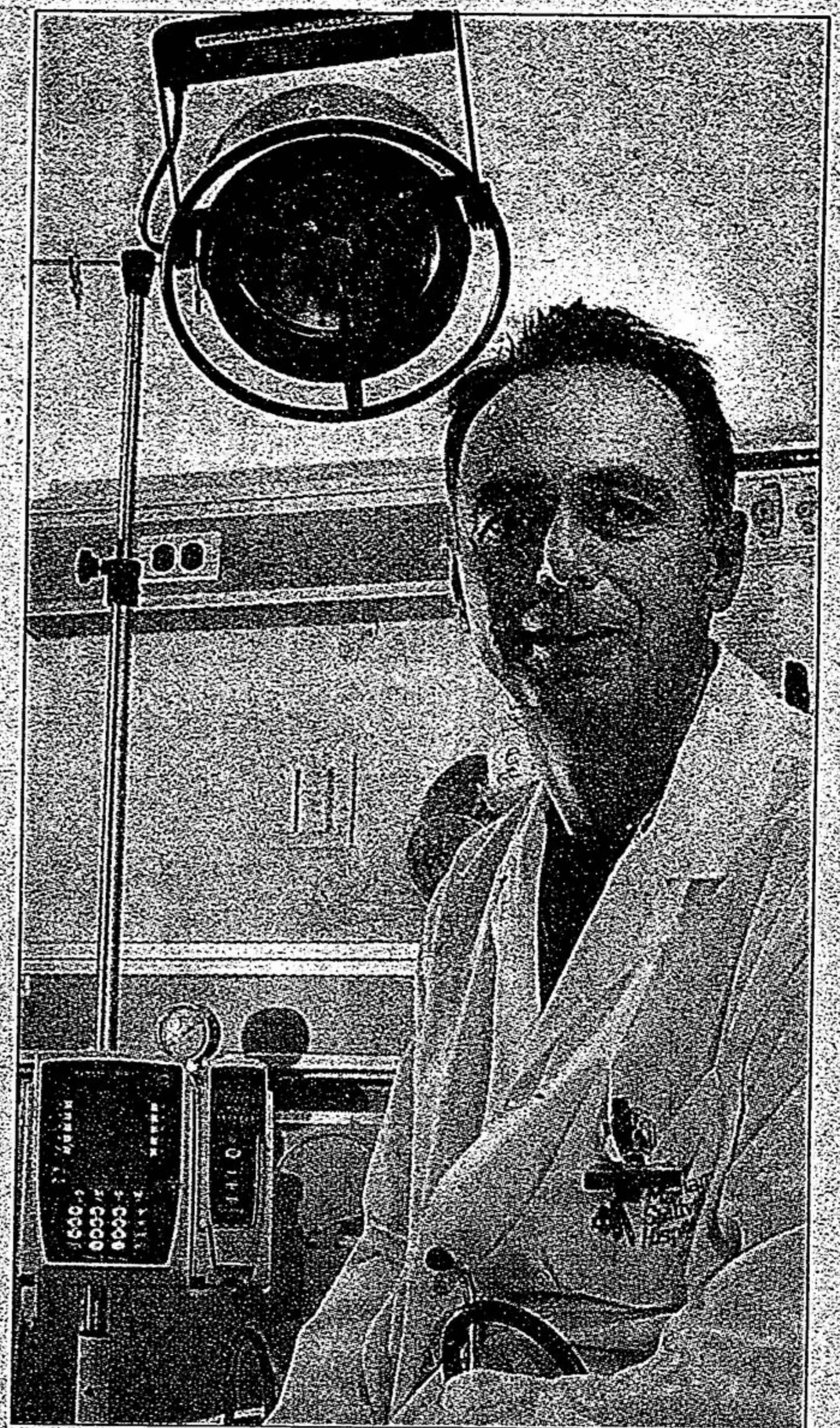
"No one wants to wait," he said. "One of the difficulties for us is meeting the expectations of everyone in the ER. Patients come here with expectations and they're not unreasonable. The average wait time to see a doctor is about two hours. Among the network, we've got one of the lowest average wait times."

His most trying time was during the SARS outbreak in 2003.

"It was a new disease no one had dealt with before and we were learning on a day to day basis," he remembered. "Right in the middle of the outbreak Scarborough Grace (Hospital) shut down and we got a lot of their patients. It was a frightening time to work in a hospital."

The episode added cache to Dr. Austin's growing reputation.

"Throughout SARS, we looked to him frequently for information on infection control," Ms Court said. "He was steady. It was probably the toughest crisis of our career, but he was there, insuring our safety, using best practices and explaining everything in his understandable way."



Dr. David Austin, chief of emergency medicine at Markham Stouffville Hospital, is described as being "competent and compassionate."

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