

The '\$5 doctor' practices medicine from bygone era

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In this Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2012 photo, Dr. Russell Dohner wears a stethoscope around his neck as he tends to patients in his office in Rushville, Ill. When Dohner started practicing medicine in Rushville in 1955, he charged \$2, the going rate around town for an office visit, but has since raised the fee to \$5. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

(AP)—Patients line up early outside his office just off the town square, waiting quietly for the doctor to arrive, as he has done for nearly 60 years.

Dr. Russell Dohner is, after all, a man of routine, a steady force to be counted on in uncertain times.

Wearing the fedora that has become his trademark, he walks in just before 10 a.m., after rising early to make rounds at the local hospital. There are no appointments. He takes his patients in the order they sign in—first come, first-served. His office has no fax machines or computers. Medical records are kept on hand-written index cards, stuffed into row upon row of filing cabinets.

The only thing that has changed, really—other than the quickness of the doctor's step or the color of his thinning hair—is his fee. When Dohner started practicing medicine in Rushville in 1955, he charged the going rate around town for an office visit: \$2.

Now it is \$5.

This in an era when the cost of healthcare has steadily risen, when those who don't have [medical insurance](#) often forgo seeing a doctor. But not Dohner's patients. He doesn't even accept medical insurance—says it's not worth the bother.

"I always just wanted to be a doctor to help people with their [medical problems](#) and that's all it's for," the 87-year-old [family physician](#) says. "It was never intended to make a lot of money."

One of seven children, Dohner grew up on a farm. His father had hoped he'd take up farming, too. But young Dohner had other ideas, inspired by the town doctor who'd treated him when he had seizures as a child.

After serving in the Army in World War II, Dohner used a scholarship fund for veterans to get a degree from a state university and then went to Northwestern University's medical school. He had his sights set on

becoming a cardiologist and thought about staying in the big city. But when a doctor in Rushville asked him to put off his heart specialist studies to practice medicine back at home, he agreed to do so, at least for a little while.

Then that doctor left town.



In this Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2012 photo, Dr. Russell Dohner, right, talks with nurse Rose Busby about a patient's prescription in Rushville, Ill. In an era of rising healthcare costs, the 87-year-old doctor only charges patients \$5 per office visit and doesn't take insurance saying it isn't worth the bother. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

"So I couldn't very well leave," Dohner says. "That's just the way it worked out."

It was a sacrifice, yes. His young wife didn't want to stay in such a small town, he says, and so their marriage ended. He never remarried and instead dedicated his life to his work, only leaving this small central Illinois town for medical conferences over the years, never taking a true vacation.

Even when the medical profession changed around him, he was always on call, ready to drop everything for a patient.

Carolyn Ambrosius, now 69, recalls how her mother went to an obstetrician when she was pregnant at age 41, a rarity back then. The doctor there told her that either she'd survive or the baby would, but not both of them—a prognosis her mother refused to accept.

So she went back to Rushville.

"God's going to take care of us—and Dr. Dohner," Ambrosius remembers her mother saying.

And the doctor did, coming to their home each day to check on her during the pregnancy, and often staying to eat meals with the family after he'd completed his exams.

But her mother did survive. "And my baby brother is now 52," Ambrosius says, standing outside Dohner's office on a crisp day after coming in for a check-up.



In this Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2012 photo, Dr. Russell Dohner, right, talks with patient Joe Logsdon about his high cholesterol in Rushville, Ill. Patients line up early outside his office just off the town square, waiting quietly for the doctor to arrive, as he has done for nearly 60 years. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

Stories like that are common around this town, a quaint place with cobblestone streets around the main square and majestic old mansions, some of which have seen better days. It's the sort of place where patients give their doctor a gift or bring baked goods to say thank you. The walls of Dohner's office hold items such as a homemade clock adorned with shiny beads, embroidery, cards, photos and paintings, including one of the doctor fishing, once a favorite pastime.

These days, though, it takes all his energy just to rise before 7 a.m. to head to the hospital, then to his office and back to the hospital, where the "Doctors' Dictating Lounge," named for his father, is set up with a desk and a cot for the occasional nap.

On Thursdays, Dohner closes his office at noon, but even then, he heads to the local nursing home to visit residents. On Sundays, he sees patients before church and stops by the hospital afterward.

He's there, indeed, like clockwork. But as much as townspeople have grown to count on him, they also worry, as he's become increasingly frail.

The doctor's staff is aging, too. One of his nurses, Rose Busby, is 86. His secretary, Edith Moore, who grew up living next door to the Dohner farm, is 85.

Moore is the one who collects the \$5 fee when the patients leave—though a few times a day, Dohner tells her "never mind" and tries to quietly let a few go with no charge. Patients sometimes protest.

"Next time, I'll pay \$20!" one insists. But it's clear that this patient and others are grateful, and often relieved.

Few [doctors](#) today could practice medicine the way Dohner does. Most of his income comes from the farm that his family still owns and that is now run by a nephew.

"I don't hardly make enough to pay my nurses," he concedes with a chuckle.

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