

The sketch doctor

Blum's drawings of his hospital patients helps extend the bond of communication

By **JEFF JENKINS**
ThisWeekend Correspondent

Many artists might use a brush, oil-based paint and a canvas.

But Dr. Alan Blum prefers a ball-point pen and his trusty prescription pad while making "art."

Blum, an associate professor of family medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, has gained notoriety for sketching patients at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital as part of his

medical procedure.

"I began doing this in medical school (at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta)," said Blum, a 49-year-old Meyerland resident. "Whenever I was making rounds, I would sketch on my pad during my break. It was my way of making a mental image of a patient; something to remember them by."

Almost 20 years later, Blum has continued the practice. Several times a week, he will sketch a patient he is seeing, using prescription pads, progress notes or what-

ever paper is available.

"I do this either in the waiting room, in my office or the hospital room two or three times a week," said Blum, who has been employed at Baylor since 1987. "I never spend more than five to 10 minutes doing it. It's just a few strokes here and there. I don't ask my patients to pose for me, so I wouldn't exactly call them portraits."

But, in Blum's opinion, the sketches are useful in building good communication between the doctor and patient.

"As a doctor, you're often in hurry, but this is a way for me to spend an extra moment with a patient," Blum said. "I feel it really deepens my listening skills. By sketching, I can capture their expressions, whether they're in pain or are happy or sad. I talk to them about their lives as well as their medical problems. In turn, it helps me do my job better."

In fact, Blum, a former winner of the American Academy of Family Physicians' National Public Health Award and of The Surgeon Gen-

eral's Medallion, said patients occasionally request that he draw them.

"I've never had a patient who was uncomfortable about the sketches," Blum said. "I've actually had a few patients who asked me if I was going to sketch them today. They seemed a little disappointed when I couldn't."

Blum's artwork has gained a following not only with patients but the entire medical community.

See BLUM on Page 4.

Blum

Continued from Page 1.

His sketches were featured recently in an art collection called "Seeing Patients: The Sketchiest Details" during an exhibit at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. The sketches illustrate patients in waiting rooms and hospital beds, with many accompanied by a quote from the subject taken from the conversation.

During a presentation held in conjunction with the exhibit and sponsored by St. Luke's Healing Environment Council and Nursing Education, Blum addressed his colleagues about issues of communicating with patients.

"With all the technology available, I think sometimes doctors forget about the art of listening," Blum said. "The more time you spend with a patient, the more you can learn from them. As I've said before, taking a few extra moments to draw them makes me a better listener."

Blum said the exhibit was his sec-

ond with St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. He also been exhibited twice at the University of Texas Health Science Center and once at the Texas Medical Center Library.

His sketches have also appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association's Literature and Medicine* as well as other respected medical journals such as *Hippocrates* and *Dimensions*.

In addition, Blum noted that he frequently talks to groups about his sketches and has been a guest speaker of Dr. Warren Holleman, a medical ethicist with Baylor College of Medicine, during Baylor's annual "Compassion and the Art of Medicine" series.

Blum, who coined himself a "Grandpa Moses medical folk artist," said he doesn't consider his sketches to be great "art."

"I'm no Rembrandt," admitted Blum, a native of Rockaway Beach, N.Y.

But Blum is, by all means, an art fan. During a trip to Washington, D.C., he visited 17 separate exhibits and seven museums.