

# The Doctor Will Sketch You Now

**T**aking the time to listen to concerns is critical to good communication between doctor and patient. Alan Blum, M.D., family practitioner at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital and professor of family practice at Baylor College of Medicine, has found an artistic way to deepen his sense of listening skills. Two or three times a week, he will sketch a patient he is seeing, many times using prescription pads, progress notes, or whatever paper is handy.

One result of this unique listening tool is an art collection called "Seeing Patients: The Sketchiest Details," selections of which were recently featured in an exhibit at St. Luke's. The sketches illustrate patients in waiting rooms and hospital beds.

Usually, Dr. Blum's sketch will be surrounded by words — the patient's own. He chooses a particular moment in the patient interview to record — to capture — the essence of the person, in drawing and words.

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

"We need to narrow the gap between what we know and what patients know," he told the group. "The more time you spend with a patient, the

smaller the gap becomes. Drawing them makes me a better listener."

In truth, Dr. Blum uses the sketching as a way of prolonging the patient interview.

He began sketching in his college days, as a casual practice. In residency, he began his first artistic "studies" of patients, taking time during breaks to talk with them about their lives as well as their



medical problems. More than 15 years later, he has hundreds of sketches of patients, and he remembers each person who inspired him.

Dr. Blum's fascination with people and the human condition is easy to understand. His father, a general practitioner in New York, used the family living room as a waiting room when he saw neighborhood patients. "He had a down-to-earth understanding of communications with patients," he says. "I hope I've learned to do that, too."

— Written by St. Luke's Department of Corporate Communications