



Julie Vails, MD

An Elk Grove family practice physician quit a high-paying job with an established medical group to practice medicine her own way.

By Anne Gonzales
Photography by Beth Baugher

In an era of assembly-line HMO'S and cookie-cutter medical groups, Julie Vails, MD, stands out like a designer dress on a Wal-Mart rack.

Vails, 34, spends an hour getting to know new patients, makes house calls, offers family counseling, holds monthly patient education seminars and never turns away a patient for financial reasons.

That part about never turning down a patient comes from Vails' own experiences as a single teenage mother on welfare. "I know what it's like to be poor and to be looked down on," says Vails, her soft brown eyes unflinching.

Twenty years ago, Vails' life was not as bright and tidy as her cottagelike Laguna Boulevard office. Growing up in Harlem and San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, Vails had two children by the time she was 17 and heard society's message loud and clear that she would never amount to anything.

"Society has negative stigmas against a teen mom and a welfare mom," Vails says. "It just made me more determined to do something with my life. I was not going to ever have anyone say to me, 'You're a young, black, single mother. You'll never get anywhere.'"

Vails had her first daughter on her 15th birthday

and was married at age 16. She was pregnant with her second daughter at age 17 and got her high school diploma from an alternative school. By age 19, she was a divorced, single mom on public assistance.

"I was looking for work, and I had secretarial skills, but I needed a credential," Vails says. While attending a community college, she took "one English class with one incredible professor who encouraged me. She told me my writing was the best she had ever seen in her classes. I applied at one college and got in."

Vails was accepted to Mills College in Oakland, where she majored in biology. She and her daughters lived in on-campus family housing.

"My entire life, people have said, 'How did you do that?'" Vails says flatly. "But you just get it done. Sure, it's hard, and you want to give up. But you persevere."

Vails first decided to become a doctor for "respect and money," although those reasons soon changed once she became a doctor. She was accepted to University of California, San Francisco's medical school in 1999 and completed her residency this past year at UC Davis Medical Center, where she interned in family practice and obstetrics. While moonlighting at several urgent care centers and emergency rooms in the Sacramento and Stockton areas, she heard many

patients—especially older adults—complain about the health care system. It bothered Vails to see that many patients didn't trust their physicians.

"They complained about not being able to see their own doctor, about the wait time, and the amount of time the doctor spends with them," Vails says. "They complained about not having evening hours, poor service, a disrespectful staff. Some patients out there are so dissatisfied."

Although Vails had what she calls a "very high paying" job with an established practice, she wasn't happy with the quality of work she was able to do there. "I didn't feel like I could do a good job in 10 minutes," Vails says. So she quit her job and opened Vails Family Practice this past year. "I knew I could do better for my patients. So I took a big dive," she says.

Vails works a couple of nights a week, which is convenient for patients who work during the day, for Vails herself, who is not a morning person.

Each new patient gets a one-hour appointment, and each appointment after that is scheduled for 30 minutes. And Vails rarely does an examination on the first visit. "No one undresses until we shake hands," Vails says. "I want my patients to know I respect them. We've all had that experience of waiting for the doctor in a paper gown in a cold room. You feel so vulnerable."

Vails' patients describe her as the antidote to frustrating waits, rushed office visits and impersonal service so common in the health care industry these days.

"It's not a sterile environment," patient Gillian Hames says of Vails' medical office. "It's comfortable and welcoming, completely different from most doctors' offices. I was immediately drawn in; the staff was so warm, and Julie was so available."

Vails insists on 100 percent cotton gowns for her patients.

Vails welcomes entire families—including siblings and grandparents—to accompany children during checkups. She figures that time spent at the doctor's office can be quality time that parents spend with children, so she fills the pale blue-splashed pediatric examining room with toys, books and educational videos. In fact, Vails, who confesses to having a "shopping bug," decorated each of the rooms in her office, making them look more like a home than a doctor's office. The adult exam room has royal blue carpet and a rich cherrywood armoire full of supplies. In addition, Vails insists on 100 percent cotton gowns for her patients: she buys the material, sews the gowns, and washes them herself.

Families and children are Vails' specialty, so she doesn't accept patients older than 55. She has 350

patients—70 percent of them female— compared to doctors at typical practices who have a patient load of 2,000 to 3,000.

"With the smaller numbers, I'm not rushed," Vails says. "I get to know the patient. I return all my own phone calls. I hope we never get so big that we can't do all those things."

She admits, though, that the smaller client base means the office struggles to make ends meet. The office is not at capacity, so it is accepting new patients, and Vails needs to expand the patient load to a point where she's profitable in order to keep her doors open.

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As a licensed family practice physician, Vails is allowed to do family and child counseling in her office, and finds that many of her patients' physical ailments stem from emotional distress.

"I do lots of psychological treatments in this office, such as one-on-one counseling and family therapy," Vails says. "Many of my patients suffer from depression, from being stressed, overworked or tired." Vails also works with patients who have obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Her background makes her particularly equipped to talk with adolescents; she frequently tackles issues with young people that parents find difficult or embarrassing.

"I'm straightforward and honest, and I'm not shy about talking about very personal issues," Vails says. "There are no topics that are off-limits in here."

In an effort to further expand patient care, Vails launched a new service called MD2U, in which she makes house and office calls on a cash-pay basis. Vails hasn't set a firm fee schedule for the service, but she hopes it will catch on with busy professionals and patients who don't want to brave urgent care centers or emergency rooms for minor illnesses.

Family is important to this family practice physician, and Vails' daughters are often with her at the office. Genevieve, 19, works full time as the office manager; Gabrielle, 16 is a frequent visitor; and Isabella, 3, goes to preschool across the street from the office and spends many evenings with her mother at the medical practice.

It probably comes as no surprise that Vails, who is single, doesn't have much spare time outside of running a family practice and raising her daughters. But she does enjoy salsa dancing. "I thought about taking a year off between med school and residency to do it professionally," she says, "but I decided that wouldn't last long."