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Dr. Craig Sweet of Specialists in Reproductive Medicine & Surgery, P.A., recently became president of the Lee County Medical Society. He has spent almost 20 years helping patients have children in Southwest Florida.

Fertility doctor has new position, same devotion

Medical Society president enjoys helping Lee families

BY DAYNA HARPSTER
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He's brought 1,520 babies into the world.

"They all came from the same 'Sweet' shop, you could say," said Kathy Eskin, who with the doctor's help gave birth to the first baby he delivered in Lee County.

Because Dr. Craig Sweet works with infertility, the reproductive endocrinologist — who was elected president of the Lee County Medical Society earlier this year — thinks in possibilities.

He's spent almost 20 years seeking ways to make the necessary cells meet to begin a child or finding a surrogate mother for a childless couple. In fact, he deals in dreams and encourages others to do the same. His Web site is DreamABaby.com.

Often for prospective parents who've tried everything to conceive a baby and failed, he's nothing short of a miracle worker.

To others, he's altering God's plan, an accusation Sweet quickly debunks.

His practice uses science to help nature. That can mean selecting embryos by gender for parents who have a boy and want a girl and vice versa, and helping

ABOUT DR. CRAIG SWEET

Age: 51
Family: Wife, Vicki; stepson, Andrew, 14; son, Parker, 16; daughter, Samantha, 13.
Hometown: Milwaukee
Education: Northwestern University, bachelor's in psychology and biology; Southern Illinois University School of Medicine; residency, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology; fellowship, Medical College of Georgia,

Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility.

Practice: Private, Specialists in Reproductive Medicine & Surgery (formerly Women's Health Care & Reproductive Services), since July 1991

Pets: 7-month-old standard poodles Ben and Jerry.

Fun skill: Juggling. According to friends Hal and Kathy Eskin, he's pretty good, and even did paid performances as a source of college money.

single people to become parents.

But Sweet, 51, is accustomed to finding the ethical boundaries, as a practicing physician and also a veteran member of ethics and review boards, for Lee Memorial Health System and the Florida Medical Society.

Although he knows he's not God, he believes that one exists. He's Jewish, and therefore doesn't believe in a vengeful God, he said. That means he does not think that because a woman has had two abortions and loses a pregnancy that she is being punished, he said.

He is comfortable with this field and the questions it raises.

"Reproductive endocrinology is the only area that allows me to do some extraordinary surgeries, and I get to use my noggin for some very complex problems. (In this field we are) detail-oriented, a little OCD, striving and

driving for our patients and ourselves."

Highly recommended

Sweet has seen plenty of complex problems in his 19 years in Southwest Florida. His patients are the parents of 942 single-baby deliveries, 250 sets of twins, 26 sets of triplets, and one set of quadruplets.

One of those twin sets was born seven weeks ago to Jennifer and Joseph Ariola, now the parents of Vincenzo and Giavanna.

When they needed a fertility doctor, "Dr. Sweet was the one everyone said we had to go to," Jennifer Ariola said. "He was very straightforward in educating us and had a refreshing manner, with a dry sense of humor that's colorful but fun."

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Many births begin with in vitro fertilization; sometimes they are conceived after Sweet corrects a hormonal imbalance and/or a medical problem. Other cases he solves through surgery to treat such issues as endometriosis.

Sweet has frozen sperm for single men who are facing sterility-causing chemotherapy; he has harvested eggs for women with severe endometriosis.

The practice has a non-destruct policy, which means that frozen embryos abandoned by patients are donated to other childless parents or to science. For a few years, some local embryos went to the Harvard Stem Cell Institute, which uses adult and embryonic stem cells to find ways to prevent organ and tissue failure. That lab is no longer accepting donations.

Sweet is looking into donating to a similar program at the University of Michigan.

More than a job

Doctor-patient relationships in his field are personal — often emotional.

Sweet's first set of parents — Eskin and her husband, Hal — lived next

ABOUT THE LEE COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY PRESIDENCY

As president of the Lee County Medical Society, Dr. Craig Sweet is concerned that today, patients — and doctors — are feeling, well, under the weather.

"The morale (among physicians) is low these days because of all the changes in the medical system. There's a feeling that our lives are a little out of control," he said.

• What are his plans as society president?

Sweet said he will continue the society's reasons for being, including to provide referral services to area specialties, to hear grievances about local professionals and to offer a speakers' bureau to groups.

He'd like to institute an awards program for doctors, perhaps judged by a group of retired doctors from another county.

He wants to expand the society's work with FGCU's pre-med students, including a mentoring program and shadowing/observation, and look into working with Edi-

son State College.

• What is his history with the medical society?

Sweet has belonged to the medical society since 1991. He's been a member of the board of governors since 2004.

About three years ago, Sweet worked with an FGCU statistician to compose and analyze a survey of local doctors about Lee Memorial's plan to purchase Southwest Florida Regional Medical Center and Gulf Coast Hospital, then its two competing hospitals. A thousand doctors were asked if they thought the purchase would help or hurt the quality of care, access to care, cost, employment opportunities or acquisition of technology.

Three hundred doctors responded, and the majority believed the hospitals' consolidation would have a negative effect. Despite that, the purchase went through.

"The problem with a monopoly is that it always starts acting like a monopoly," Sweet said.

• How does he see his role as president?

Sweet believes he should be the "center spoke." So he has asked Dr. John Burdzy, chairman of the Lee Memorial board of medicine, to sit on the county medical society board for a year to have a more cohesive year.

He also has reached out and pulled up a chair on the board for the president of the Independent Physicians of Lee County, Steve Zellner, who will be an ad hoc member.

• What does Burdzy have to say about Sweet?

"For many years, he has offered our local college students the opportunity to apply their basic science knowledge in a clinical setting," Burdzy said. "This allows them to see real world applications of what they are learning. Efforts such as his may pay dividends in the future as we seek to broaden our economic base to include high tech and medical industries."

door to Sweet after the child's birth and for a number of years. The families stayed in touch, personally as well as professionally.

The Eskins were the first members of his Infertility Support Group almost 20 years ago.

They are even the godparents of Sweet's children: Parker, 16, and Samantha, 13. Their mother is Victoria, from whom he is divorced.

To 17-year-old Fort Myers High School junior David Eskin, he's "Uncle Craig."

"He always seemed like a pretty cool guy," David Eskin said. "He used to drive a Mitsubishi Eclipse convertible, and as a kid, I thought that was the coolest car."

With Sweet's help again, the Eskins became parents of twins Natalie and Sydney, now 13.

Those girls and the

other children born of his practice remain important to Sweet, and so do their parents.

"If doctors become doctors to make money these days, I think they're going to be very disappointed," Sweet said. "The most important aspect of being a doctor is our relationships with our patients. Also having a practice that is rewarding, that seems to have some meaning."