



# Dr. Nicole Bentze

## To your good health

**BY RUTH LANDO**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN WAGNER**

Dr. Nicole Bentze is the kind of doctor you hope to have when you need one. Compassionate. Caring. Smart. Devoted to her patients and dedicated to her students.

She's a role model for the special type of medical professional that her team strives to create at the regional campus of the Florida State University College of Medicine in Sarasota, where Dr. Bentze is the new dean. Board certified in family medicine by the American Board of Family Medicine and the American Osteopathic Board of Family Physicians, Dr. Bentze is highly trained in preventative medicine, adolescent care, women's health and management of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. Following medical school in Philadelphia, she did her internship and residency in Harrisburg, Pa., later working as a faculty physician for the Harrisburg Family Practice Residency Program, where she taught and mentored residents-in-training. Dr.

Bentze also completed a competitive post-graduate primary care faculty development fellowship at the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine in medical education and curriculum design. She is both prepared and thrilled to take the reins as FSU dean, looking to educate and inspire future doctors and put everyone on a track to success.

Many people aren't even aware that Sarasota is one of six sites in Florida that has third and fourth-year FSU med students completing their community training. But since 2001, they've been living and learning here, getting significant patient contact and one-on-one mentoring by local physicians. They rotate through all the large specialties of family medicine in four to six week blocks, including internal, psychiatry, OB/GYN, surgery, emergency medicine and geriatric.

Dr. Bentze had only been on the job for two weeks when we met for coffee downtown, and as with all new beginnings, she was eager to talk about what makes her job exceptional. "We're bringing medicine and primary care to the state of Florida, which

we desperately need," she says. Once they've done all of their didactic training (book learning) on the Tallahassee campus of FSU, and mastered a huge volume of medical knowledge in anatomy, physiology, microbiology, pharmacy, etc., about 40 medical students come here to stretch themselves beyond "book smart." They are taught how to apply their training to real patients and how to interact with a wide cross-section of people. "It brings the humanity back into medicine and it's a great way to learn the profession." To be skillful doctors, they have to know how to listen to patients, how to think critically and how to take into account all aspects of a person's life: things like their environment, community, genetics and risk factors. Do they smoke? What's their job like? What's their stress level and how do they cope? What's their outlook on life and the quality of their mental health? "It's a unique way of looking at medical education," says the new dean.

This holistic approach to doctor training is not the way Dr. Bentze says she was taught.

"I was in a group, just one of many little ducks

following the fellows or the physicians around the hospital,” she recalls. But in the FSU model, students gain a breadth of experience by going directly into doctor’s offices, surgery centers, clinics, outpatient settings and hospitals, where they focus on primary care. “They learn one-on-one, asking questions and interacting with patients. They learn what to say and what not to say and how to say it.” Unlike many medical schools, FSU in Sarasota doesn’t have a university hospital attached to one academic center, which makes the training experience more community based. Over the past 14 years, 208 students have graduated with their MD degrees and moved onto their residencies all over the country. Some have returned to Sarasota as practicing doctors and one is currently giving back to students in the same program in which she was trained.

When Dr. Bentze moved to Sarasota in 2004 with her physician husband, Michael, and their two children, they became family doctors together. The pair was recruited by the newly built Lakewood Ranch hospital. With her love of teaching, Dr. Nicole Bentze became a preceptor or mentor for students in her medical office. Ten years ago, a friend and colleague left her clerkship director’s position in family medicine at FSU, and that job was both a natural fit and great stepping stone to the deanship.

“Every day we hear about all the negative things about medicine, and especially as Florida’s population is getting older,” Dr. Bentze says. “Do we have the manpower? Do we have the infrastructure that our community needs to stay healthy? One way to do that is by having very competent physicians that know what they’re doing, compassionate physicians that can take care of the whole person. That’s what we’re really trying to create. Having very competent, well-trained physicians that are highly sought after by whatever residency program they want to go to... whether they want to be in a suburban or rural or urban area. Wherever they want to go, whatever their passion is in life, we need to navigate them there and make them the best candidate they can be.”

Dr. Bentze says she misses interacting with the patients in her private practice, sharing their lives and getting them healthy. But she feels like each year she’s training 40 great students to take her place. It was a big leap to stop being a clinician, but one worth making. “If you have that small little voice that’s inside of you saying I really wish I could do this or I really want to do this, then listen to it,” she advises. “Figure out your support system. Figure out how it’s going to work. Try to quiet that negative voice that’s in your head that gets louder and louder all the time and go for it. Make yourself as ready as you possibly can be so that when that opportunity comes, you feel that you are in a position where you can be very competitive to get that job. That’s the most important thing.” Dr. Bentze wants her students to also be very resilient, to learn how to deal with the bad things that will inevitably happen in their personal lives and with their patients. “Breaking bad news is not only life changing for the patient, but the physician feels it too,” she explains.

Part of what facilitates Dr. Bentze’s work/life balance is having a husband who understands exactly what her challenging career is like. They try not to talk too much shop at home, she says, but enjoy the benefits of a mutually shared career experience. Having a son who’s 12 and a daughter who’s 9 is also “a blessing,” she notes. “It’s wonderful seeing them grow up and being a mom. Doing things as a family. That is very important, although it’s tough at times.” She makes sure that neither aspect of her life is pitted against the other, that there is no winning or losing when it comes to choosing between work and personal priorities. To decompress, the Bentzes do “kid activities” together, such as pottery and 5K run/walk events with their son. When they have a day that allows it, they take off for a spontaneous trip to Legoland or Busch Gardens — something that pushes two highly scheduled and regimented professionals out of their comfort zones.

Meanwhile, as dean, Dr. Bentze encourages her students to be the best they can be, to put their best foot forward, to impress so they can follow their dreams. “This is it. I want to be right here,” she notes. “The ability to mentor and be a role model for students who really want to follow their passion and become great physicians? I really can’t think of anything better. Contributing to the future of health care is an honor. It gets me excited and motivated to get out of bed every day.”