

Finding Challenge and Reward in the ICU: Shahriyar Tavakoli, MD

By: Roxanne Jones



Family Moments: Shahriya Tavakli, MD, with daughter Alexis, 5, and wife Mixel.

During my medical training, my mentors taught me that the qualities of leadership and calmness are very important to being an effective critical care physician," says Shahriyar Tavakoli, MD. As the well-regarded Section Chief of Pulmonary Medicine and Medical Director of Critical Care at Eisenhower Medical Center, Dr. Tavakoli clearly took his mentors' advice to heart.

"It takes a certain personality to be a critical care physician," he acknowledges. "You have to work well with everyone, since the ICU is a multi-disciplinary environment and you are usually the liaison with other doctors, nurses and ancillary services. You must be available almost 24/7. You have to manage complex situations...patients in the ICU are very sick and often have overwhelming infections, respiratory or other organ failure, and are on multiple medications. You must be able to communicate with patients' families, to inform and reassure them. And ultimately, you must put the patient's best interests first, and find the common ground for the best outcome. It's a lot of responsibility."

Dr. Tavakoli was drawn to medicine in junior high school in his native Iran. "I had an innate attraction to natural science," he recalls, and this was the academic path he followed through high school graduation. He came to the United States in 1977, taking a six-month intensive course to learn English, and completed his undergraduate degree at University of California, Irvine. He went to an American medical school at the University of Puerto Rico at Bayamon, did his internal medicine residency at the University of Southern California, and completed a two-year Fellowship in critical care medicine at the National Institutes of Health and another in pulmonology at the George Washington University Medical Center. He came to Eisenhower Medical Center in 1996, where he has been in private practice ever since.

"Here in the valley, Eisenhower has pioneered the concept of intensivists," Dr. Tavakoli says, referring to the use of critical care specialists like himself in the ICU. "My goal is to promote and advance critical care at Eisenhower to continually improve the quality of care and patient safety." Working with the hospital's Education Department and the Annenberg Center for Health Sciences at Eisenhower, Dr. Tavakoli has championed an annual critical care conference for other medical professionals. He also intends to bring an interventional pulmonology program to Eisenhower, utilizing advanced technology to diagnose and treat lung cancer. Dr. Tavakoli is also involved in a major national clinical study to evaluate the effectiveness of spiral CT as a screening tool for the early detection of lung cancer.

The demands of Dr. Tavakoli's job (he refers to the ICU as his "second home") limit his ability to pursue hobbies such as water polo and soccer, which he played in high school and college. He is more interested in spending his precious free time with family. He and his wife, a social worker who's now a full-time mother, have a five-year-old daughter. "It's my mission to expose our daughter to as many different cultures as possible," he says. "We've taken her everywhere we've traveled, including Europe and Mexico, since she was two. I think I have been able to have good social interaction with people in the hospital due to my exposure to other cultures, and I want to give my daughter the same benefit."