



## Stephen Brown is WY's Physician of the Year



Dr. Brown's friends know him as someone who puts his family first. "He is the epitome of the family man," Dr. Sigsbee Duck said. "He loves his family—his children and his lovely wife. Medicine is great, and his devotion to pediatric psychiatry and the Medical Society—they're all great. But they are secondary to how much he loves and cares for and is so proud of his family."

Meet Stephen Brown, MD:

# Wyoming Physician of the Year

BY ELIZABETH SAMPSON  
Wyoming Medical Society

**T**rying to hold back the tide in the middle of a landlocked state may seem impossible to some, but that is just what one Wyoming doctor has been doing since he arrived here.

Casper's Dr. Stephen Brown, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, has at times been the only one standing between trauma and Wyoming children in need of mental health care. He started his practice in Wyoming in 1990, and since then there have been times when he was alone as the only child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in the state.

Now, 30 years into his practice, Dr. Brown has not only held

back the tide for those children—he has worked to turn the tide of mental health care throughout Wyoming for the better.

"He has been a champion for increasing access to mental health services for children and adolescents in Wyoming," said Cheyenne's Dr. Robert Monger who has known Dr. Brown for about 20 years. "That's something he is well known for, and he has done a great job."

To honor his tireless efforts and commitment to his field, Dr. Brown has been named the Wyoming Medical Society's Physician of the Year for 2019. His friend, Dr. Sigsbee Duck of Rock Springs, himself a former Physician of the Year, nominated





Dr. Stephen Brown has been named as the Wyoming Medical Society's 2019 Physician of the year. He is a child and adolescent psychiatrist based in Casper.

#### Dr. Brown.

"I can't think of a more gracious, caring and intellectual person and physician to represent our state as Physician of the Year," Dr. Duck said. "Dr. Brown has been an invaluable asset and resource for pediatric psychiatry. He essentially established pediatric psychiatry in the state of Wyoming. He's a very caring man and goes the extra mile to try to help kids with psychiatric issues."

There is no shortage of practitioners in Wyoming who agree with Dr. Duck's assessment.

"Steve is a clear choice for Physician of the Year," said longtime friend Dr. Paul Johnson of Cheyenne. "He has a long history of advocating not only for his patients in the exam room but for patients in the entire state and country."

Throughout his career, Dr. Brown has worked to not only increase access to mental health care, he has also been an advocate for a better understanding of the field of mental health itself.

"I've always been trying to make sure that mental health is recognized and appreciated," he said.

Doing so has meant volunteering with various medical boards and societies, working to improve the mental health education for medical students in the state and challenging those who

would try to cut funding for mental health care.

Dr. Brown grew up on a farm and ranch near Brush, Colo. where he earned the title of 4-H Eastern Slope Livestock Judging Champion. He attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs where he received his undergraduate degree in physics. While there he played small college football as a defensive end. His team was nationally ranked every year and even went to the national playoffs.

Following his junior year of college, he and some friends prospected for gold in the backcountry of Alaska.

"We found enough gold that it would have paid for our trip and then some," he said. Dr. Johnson joked he was glad Dr. Brown didn't take to prospecting full-time.

"We are all lucky Steve wasn't a very good prospector or Wyoming would have lost an amazing physician," he said.

Dr. Brown went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering and an MBA at Washington University in St. Louis before graduating from Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. He completed his residency in general psychiatry at Barnes Hospital at Washington University in St. Louis where he received the first Award for Clinical Excellence. From there he completed a child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship at St. Louis Children's Hospital and Washington University.

After he completed his training he knew he wanted to reside in the west. He and his wife Helen had intended to move back to Colorado for his practice, but nothing seemed to fit, prompting them to look north to Casper instead.

"It was actually the only place we looked in Wyoming, and we



Dr. Brown and his wife Helen enjoy spending time in Jackson Hole. Dr. Brown said he relies on his wife Helen for support and advice.



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fell in love with it," Dr. Brown said.

Upon his arrival in Wyoming, he quickly got to work improving the state's mental health care, and he hasn't stopped since. Dr. Brown is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), and he has a private practice in Casper with both outpatients and inpatients. He is the Chief Medical Officer for Wyoming Behavioral Institute (WBI). He helped the facility go from 50 beds to 120 beds and become even more of a full-service psychiatric hospital after he arrived in the state, which is one of the things he is most proud of in his career.

Since his arrival, he has seen some changes for the better in the way mental health is viewed by people of Wyoming.

"There's a much higher recognition of the importance of mental health treatment," he said. "There's more recognition that society has a really significant problem in this state. I think there's been a lot of work in trying to get people to recognize it, but it is just affecting so many people. Wyoming is usually the number two or three state in the nation for suicide rates."

Other changes he has seen include mental health treatment itself.

"The art of treating kids has improved some," he said, and he noted that there are now more child psychiatrists in the state—though there is still room for more.

"We actually have extremely competent physicians in this state that everybody should be thankful for," Dr. Brown said. "But there is a shortage, and an even bigger shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists. I was often one of one, two or three child psychiatrists in the state. When there was one it was just me. Now I think we are up to eight or so."

The sheer size of Wyoming makes the shortage of psychiatrists even more of a burden. Some patients have been known to have to drive a couple of hundred miles to find psychiatric care. Knowing this, Dr. Brown took to the air to reach his patients. For about 15 years he flew to clinics in Gillette, Cody, Jackson and Rock Springs. He still keeps up with his clinic in Jackson.

Helping so many children and adolescents made the extra effort to see them worth it.

"My favorite memories are when a light bulb goes on in a child's brain over a therapeutic issue and they suddenly do better," Dr. Brown said. "Sometimes you don't think an adolescent has really got it. They leave and you're not sure they are doing well, and then a few years down the line you get a thank you note saying 'I finally understood what everyone was trying to get me to do,' and then they'll tell you how much better they are."

Dr. Brown remembers an adolescent patient he had who was bi-polar, but her parents were against using medication to treat her. When she reached adulthood, she arrived in his office without her parents and told him she was old enough now to be in



Dr. Brown pictured with his wife and granddaughter Addyli.



Dr. Brown enjoys traveling to spend time with his children.

charge of her own health and medical choices.

"She showed up in my office, and I said, 'Why are you here?'" He remembered. "She said, 'I'm 18 and I can now choose to have my own medicine, and I know I need it.'"

Advocating for patients like this adolescent whose parents didn't want to get her treatment has been a big part of Dr. Brown's career. He has pushed to make people understand the importance of physician care for mental health patients.

"The reliability of diagnoses in psychiatry is one of the highest in any field of medicine," Dr. Brown said. "People don't recognize it because we don't do blood tests and lab tests as much, but the diagnoses criteria is pretty clear and pretty reliable."

Over the 30 years he has been practicing, there have been some consistent challenges to face.

"There continues to be prejudice against providing resources in the mental health field," he said. He added that even though there are mental health parity laws in place ensuring that mental is covered equally, health insurance companies seem to have ways to get around those laws.

"They do it in subtle ways, but they really do it," Dr. Brown



said. “Insurance companies fail to recognize that rural mental health doesn’t have some of the resources of big cities, so it complicates it.”

Other hurdles go beyond problems with insurance companies to the political arena.

“There’s always struggles with the Department of Health finances and providing adequate treatment,” he noted. “In this state one of the biggest expenditures is on mental health, and that’s one of the ones that often gets targeted when cuts come.”

Despite these struggles with outside forces, Dr. Brown said he has been pleased with the support the mental health field has received.

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised with how other medical doctors are quite supportive of mental health,” he said.

As part of his advocacy work, Dr. Brown has been a long-time member and leader of the Wyoming Medical Society. He has served two terms as president and has been a long-term member of the executive committee.

Dr. Duck served with Dr. Brown on the WMS board for many years and counts him as a great leader.

“Steve’s very level-headed,” Dr. Duck said. “He has the ability to tell the truth in a way that other people respect his opinion, and most of the time that opinion is followed. He’s honest. He’s caring. He’s smart. He says what he thinks, but he’s very gracious and tactful.”

Beyond the Wyoming Medical Society, Dr. Brown has served as the Wyoming delegate to the the American Medical Association and the representative to APA Assembly. He represented the western area of the APA, was chairman of the council for the western area and served on the APA Assembly executive committee.

“I’ve always been advocating for mental health, and psychiatry in particular,” he said.

His efforts to establish a third-year clerkship in psychiatry in Wyoming for the state’s medical students were successful, which helps to ensure future psychiatrists will be available here.

Dr. Brown has also volunteered his time for the community of Casper. He was again the president of the Natrona County Medical Society several years ago to help revive the organization, and this year he received their Physician Service Award. He was a long-time member of the Rotary Club in Casper and served on the board of directors and acted as president for the Casper Development Center. He also served in those same roles for Mountain Pacific Quality Health, which is a four-state not-for-profit quality improvement organization.

Outside of his practice and volunteer work, Dr. Brown makes time to travel extensively with his wife and their family. In addition to visiting with their three children, including 28-year-old



Dr. Stephen Brown and his wife Helen have three children. His twin daughters are named Julie and Danielle, and his son is named Matt.

twin daughters and a 27-year-old son who live in Denver and Los Angeles, Dr. Brown and his wife like to go boating, utilizing their boat slip at Jackson Lake in the Tetons. They also like to enjoy other Wyoming pastimes like skiing, hunting and fishing. In addition, Dr. Brown enjoys backpacking into the Wind River Mountains.

“He is the epitome of the family man,” Dr. Duck said. “He loves his family—his children and his lovely wife. Medicine is great, and his devotion to pediatric psychiatry and the Medical Society—they’re all great. But they are secondary to how much he loves and cares for and is so proud of his family.”

Dr. Brown said that his wife is someone he can look to when he needs help.

“I rely on my wife for support and advice,” he said. “She has a lot of wisdom.” Undoubtedly it will be her advice that he looks to when he decides it’s time to transition to retirement. For now though, he doesn’t see that in his immediate future.

“I don’t have any present plans to retire,” he said. “Probably what I will do is try to figure out how to slowly limit what I am doing, but I still enjoy seeing patients get better.”

Perhaps young doctors just entering their field could benefit by heeding Dr. Brown’s description of what makes a good psychiatrist.

“As with most physicians, having compassion, using the science of medicine to help people and being flexible are key,” he said. “Use your intuition. Then you pick up on things much quicker, and you use science to confirm things, but science doesn’t have the solution to everything. That’s true of every field of medicine.” 