

# THE Durango HERALD

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## Durango doctor packing up

### Richard Grossman retiring after 38 years

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## SHAUN STANLEY/Durango Herald

If you met him only briefly, it would be easy to underestimate Dr. Richard Grossman. You'd likely categorize him as soft-spoken. You might say he's shy, perhaps even meek.

And then you'd be puzzled: How can such an unassuming gentleman be the center of such emotionally charged controversy?

After 38 years practicing in Durango, Grossman is retiring as an obstetrician/gynecologist. He's famous locally for his stances on abortion and climate change, but those around him in the medical field don't see such a narrowly focused person.

"He has this huge heart. He cares so much about his patients," says Dr. Kim Priebe, a cohort of Grossman's for 11 years at Four Corners OB-GYN. "It's not the business of medicine at all for him. ... It's amazing how well he knows his patients and how much he cares about them."

Whether you agree with his views or not, they're all based on a deep respect for life and women's rights. They're views sculpted from another era, views that today's generation

might not fully appreciate.

His political stances all stem from one concern: overpopulation. By high school, Grossman had realized that although politically inept, he had an aptitude for science.

“I decided one thing I could do was to help with population issues,” Grossman says in an interview at his Bayfield-area home. “And I’ve stuck to that pretty well.”

There’s a bit of a time crunch this morning because he and his wife, Gail, are preparing for a short backpack trip. If there’s a stereotypical doctor’s wife, Gail probably isn’t it. She’s at least as passionate as her husband about issues, including a woman’s right to choose and the environment.

She has a master’s in teaching from Harvard. She was a high school teacher and later spent 21 years teaching at the Durango Early Learning Center. She’s also volunteered with Durango Nature Studies for about two decades.

Over the years, she’s seen the ugliness from those who don’t agree with her husband providing abortion services, and she’s steadfastly supported what he does.

“He’s doing what he believes in, and I believe in it, too,” she says.

She mentions the time that an abortion protester ate lunch outside the Grossmans’ house. When Gail left the house the man yelled at her: “Your husband is a baby-killer.”

That was “outside the rules of engagement,” Dr. Grossman says, planning his words carefully per his custom. But what happened next speaks volumes of the doctor’s way with people, and of his Quaker theology. Though nervous about the outcome, he met with the man through an intermediary, then one-on-one. The man “was troubled for a wonderful reason,” Grossman recalls. The man broke down while telling Grossman he was a single parent to a boy whose mom wanted nothing to do with him.

Grossman’s life experiences pulled him in a different direction from abortion protesters. When he was in college and medical school, abortion was illegal. And when a pregnant college classmate was run over by a train – almost certainly a suicide from the shame and confusion she felt – that galvanized Grossman’s pro-rights stance.

He grew up in Philadelphia, and he and Gail met there at Swarthmore College. They were married in 1966 after his first year of medical school, which he graduated from in 1969. He registered as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and, in lieu of going to war, was able to serve as a doctor in an area desperately in need. The Grossmans chose tiny Questa, New Mexico, just north of Taos.

After a three-year residency at the University of New Mexico, the Grossmans considered six places to settle. Durango was “the least lucrative by a longshot,” but they chose it because it was a good place to raise their two small boys.

Grossman began doing abortions not long after they became legal in 1973 when “Jane Roe” won her U.S. Supreme Court case against Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade. He saw women struggling with unplanned pregnancies, and he saw what happened in the 1960s when illegal, unsafe abortions were common and risky.

“There’s not the cultural memory of unsafe abortions because there’s not many people left who were aware of what was happening in the ’60s,” he says. “It’s sad.”

His basic goal is to prevent overpopulation because that increases demands on resources and leads to armed conflict.

“If one is a physician and has the opportunity to perform safe, legal abortions and is concerned about population issues, it only makes sense to be an abortion provider,” he says.

Performing abortions is but a tiny part of his practice. He’s more involved in healthy pregnancies, and has delivered a couple thousand local babies – and babies of some of those babies.

Grossman believes that his monthly Herald column, “Population Matters!” is the only regular population column in the world. He started it 20 years ago, not long after attending an international population conference in Egypt.

An easy solution is not forthcoming, as the world’s 7.17 billion inhabitants continue to multiply. Those inhabitants are consuming world resources – led by the biggest consumer of all, the U.S. And that consumption is – at least according to a preponderance of world scientists – leading to climate change.

The Quaker in him abhors the thought that water and food shortages caused by climate change can lead to armed conflict.

His position on climate change led to more public notoriety, albeit somewhat less controversial than abortion.

In reaction to a Herald opinion piece by retired Exxon Mobil executive Roger Cohen questioning the validity of claims that human activity is causing the Earth to warm, Grossman took up Cohen's challenge to bet. Each anted \$5,000; no matter who wins the 10-year-long bet, which ends in 2017, the money will go to Durango Nature Studies.

This week, Grossman will see the last of his patients, some of whom have paid him over the years with crocheted works or with Navajo rugs that adorn the office and his house. Priebe says the women tell Grossman the worth of the goods, and he pays them more.

He'll continue, post-retirement, a study on pregnancy-induced hypertension, or preeclampsia, which is deadly in its most serious form. And he'll have an adjustment to make: "People view me, and I view myself, as Dr. Grossman."

Although he won't be beholden to the office, it's pretty hard to envision him whiling away his time puttering around the house. As we know, sometimes superheroes are mild-mannered. To assume he'll fade away quietly would be to again underestimate a man whose strong convictions have never wavered when challenged.

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