**On call, on the air**

“If you have questions about varicose veins, leg cramps, peripheral artery disease or any kind of circulation and leg problems, now is the time to get your questions ready and call them in,” family physician Ray Christensen, MD, tells members of the Duluth-area viewing audience as local and toll-free telephone numbers flash across the television screen.

Christensen is sitting in the host’s chair for “Doctors on Call,” a show on WDSE-WRPT, the PBS station in Duluth/Superior. With him are three other physicians: a family doc from Lake Superior Health Clinic, a vascular surgeon from St. Luke’s Medical Center and an interventional radiologist from Essentia Health.

The program, which is in its 33rd season, is one of the longest-running medical advice shows in the United States. It averages more than 10,000 viewers a week and is the station’s second-most-watched locally produced program.

“We’ve been up against sports and political figures, and our numbers haven’t changed,” says Christensen, who is associate dean for rural health at the University of Minnesota Medical School Duluth. He has been one of the show’s hosts for nearly 13 years and now shares those duties with two other physicians from the medical school, Ruth Westra, DO, and Alan Johns, MD.

The show’s format hasn’t deviated during that time, either. Each Thursday night for 18 weeks starting in October, the host physician leads a panel of three physicians (usually one family physician and two specialists) through a half-hour discussion about a health topic. Three medical students man the phones, writing down questions from viewers. The host then throws the questions to the panelists, who provide answers and advice.

“When this program first hit the airwaves, it was pretty groundbreaking,” says Producer Juli Kellner. “In the ’80s, it was rare to find a television show featuring frank discussion about topics like prostate cancer.” Kellner, who credits “Doctors on Call” with raising the level of medical knowledge in the region, works with Christensen and the other hosts to come up with topics. This season’s lineup included shows on diabetes, heart problems, infectious diseases and immunizations and skin problems, as well as leg and circulation problems.

“Our viewing audience is an older audience,” Christensen says. “We’ve tried shows for younger people on topics like sports medicine, and we don’t get calls. If the phones don’t ring, it’s not easy to do the show.”

Christensen says despite the show’s longevity and popularity, it’s becoming more difficult to get physicians to participate. When he first served as a panelist in the 1990s, the university and three medical societies (Lake Superior, Range and Douglas County in Wisconsin) supplied the physician experts. Now, the hosts and a program coordinator reach out to physicians from across northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin.

“A lot of physicians are a little nervous about coming on the program,” he says, adding that taking questions from callers can be a little like sitting for boards (“you never know what the questions will be, so you have to brush up”). Christensen says he usually asks the first question to get them warmed up, then moves on to those from viewers. “The nice thing about being on a panel is that if you don’t know the answer, you can say you don’t know,” he says. “Sometimes none of us knows the answer, and it’s our responsibility to be open about that.”

He says the public—and patients—appreciate their efforts. “People enjoy seeing their doctor on the program,” he says, adding that he’s had patients suggest topics for future shows. “Last week, someone called in and thanked us for the information about diabetes. That was a first. He said he was very happy to have listened to our program.” – KIM KISER