

Humboldt County physician receives CMA's 2023 Plessner Award

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Humboldt County internist Bruce Kessler, M.D., received the California Medical Association's most prestigious award, the Frederick K.M. Plessner Memorial Award. The award honors the California physician who best exemplifies the ethics and practice of a rural country practitioner.

Dr. Kessler first arrived in Humboldt County in 1978 and spent the next four decades providing a high standard of care and exhibiting qualities of excellence and kindness for his patients, many of whom are continually challenged by distance, terrain, poverty, and health literacy.

"Dr. Kessler deserves recognition for his excellence, compassion, leadership and commitment and for his ongoing joy and love of medical practice, which is rare in our current health care climate," said Jennifer Heidmann, M.D., the medical director of Redwood Coast PACE. "He exemplifies what a doctor should be."

Both during his time as a practicing physician and after his retirement in 2018, Dr. Kessler worked to create and expand medical programs and services for rural residents who often struggle with access to care.

"In the spirit of Dr. Plessner, whose legacy of compassion and innovation continues to inspire us, Dr. Kessler has demonstrated what it means to lead with wisdom, empathy, and boundless determination," said CMA

President Donaldo Hernandez, M.D. “Dr. Kessler has made a profound impact on, not only his patients, but his entire community.”

“I think the biggest challenge in medical care in our county currently is manpower shortages,” said Dr. Kessler. “We have long waiting lists for patients waiting to see specialists in any one of a number of specialties.”

In 2015, the CEOs of St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka and Open Door Clinic Community Health Centers, the local federally qualified health center, began discussing pooling resources to create a family medicine residency program.

“I was asked to be part of the planning committee to plan for the residency program,” said Dr. Kessler. “And it’s been my privilege for the last eight years to work on the planning stage of the residency, and then for the last five years – when we’ve had our first, second, and finally third class of residents here – to be involved in teaching the residents.”

Dr. Kessler was also a key figure in bringing cancer care access to a region long deprived of it. He was part of a group of medical community leaders that applied for a \$900,000 grant from the National Cancer Institute that led to the establishment of a radiation oncology program, a home-base hospice program and accreditation by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer, which brought a tumor board to the region.

“We are all the beneficiaries of his dedication to doing the right thing for every patient in the most competent and kindest way possible, his determination to leave the academic world and the prestige and opportunity it presented, to come to an area where he made the biggest difference,” said Ellen Mahoney, M.D., who built on Dr. Kessler’s efforts to improve cancer care in Humboldt County. “He has been my hero now for over 45 years, and he richly deserves the recognition [the Plessner award] represents.”

Kessler also serves on the board of the Humboldt Senior Resource Center, a nonprofit that provides services, information, education and recreation for seniors, families and caregivers in Humboldt County; and is one of the founders of the Humboldt Bay Mycological Society, through which he has given lectures and led field trips discussing toxic mushrooms.

Kessler is a native of New York and a graduate of Tufts University and Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. He served his medical residency in internal medicine at Stanford University Hospital.

“I wanted something more hands-on with people,” Dr. Kessler said of his decision to pursue medicine instead of science after college. “I can’t now have imagined a life better spent.”