

The President's Doctor

William Matthew Lukash

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 23— He is from Michigan, his wife is from Grand Rapids, and they prefer informality. He played football, and spends his few free hours exercising with his family. Though he has a pool in his backyard, he has a book about building swimming pools on the desk in his office at the White House. He wishes he had more time to golf.

He is affable, diplomatic, considerate and chooses simple words in discussing complex matters in a way that puts others at ease during potentially stressful periods. His colleagues say he takes his job seriously, is well-organized, does his homework methodically, is unusually productive and never loses his cool.

It could be a description of President. But it is one of his physician, Rear Admiral William Matthew Lukash, a 43-year-old Navy officer and a specialist in digestive diseases at the Bethesda Naval Medical Center.

Role Changes

In an interview in the office where today he completed the first thorough physical examination President Ford has had since he became commander in chief, Admiral Lukash acknowledged that his medical role had changed from a super-specialist to that of a family practitioner.

Other doctors regard Admiral Lukash as unusually well-qualified for his role as chief White House physician, the position to which President Ford appointed him a week ago. Admiral Lukash served on a part-time basis since 1966 as assistant White House physician, first to President Johnson and then to President Nixon.

At the same time, he taught younger physicians about internal medicine, lectured about the widespread damage resulting from alcohol abuse, directed research that touched on diabetes, and treated Navy patients and their families for ulcers, cirrhosis, inflamed colons and similar disorders.

"This is a full-time commitment," Admiral Lukash said of his new job as he swiveled in his chair on the ground floor of the White House.

With two physician assistants, Admiral Lukash has over-all responsibility for the health of the President, the Vice President, their families and the working staff of the White House. His job also involves basic fundamentals of public health—close sanitary supervision of food and plumbing at the White House.

Admiral Lukash said he gave President Ford a clean bill of health on the basis of laboratory tests, a physical

examination and "my clinical impressions watching how he reacts to everything."

After graduating from Michigan State University, where he tried out as a quarterback and concentrated on liberal arts subjects, he said, "the esteem" of the medical profession attracted him to the University of Michigan, where he earned his M.D. in 1956. Following an internship at Wayne County General Hospital in Eloise, Michigan, he joined the Naval Medical Corps, learning his specialty in internal medicine and polishing his bedside manner in naval hospitals throughout the country.

Approach to Patient

From this experience, "I've become more aware of the importance of knowing the ramifications of the total patient, his personality, his dislikes, how he handles fatigue and disappointments, how he is able to be re-energized and how all this affects is health," Dr. Lukash said.

For President Ford that requires swimming, weight-lifting and other exercises to strengthen the muscles supporting his knee joints. Surgeons had to repair cartilage in each of his knees that had been damaged in football and skiing.

Dr. Lukash, dressed in a pinstriped dark blue civilian suit, said he approached his new job in a manner similar to a physician practicing in a small country town, making useful small talk in his daily conversation with the President.

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"I don't want to feel I'm in the position of always talking health," Admiral Lukash said.

"Bill made the patient sitting in front of him feel that he was the only one in the world that mattered to him at the time," said a physician who once practiced with Admiral Lukash.

Like his boss, President Ford, Admiral Lukash relies on exercise—swimming and tennis—to relax. His wife, the former Gwen Hansen, whom he met in college, swims 60 laps a day in the pool in the backyard of their Potomac, Md., home as part of prescribed therapy for a chronic back condition.

A son, Danny, age 16, is a junior at Wooyin High School in Potomac.

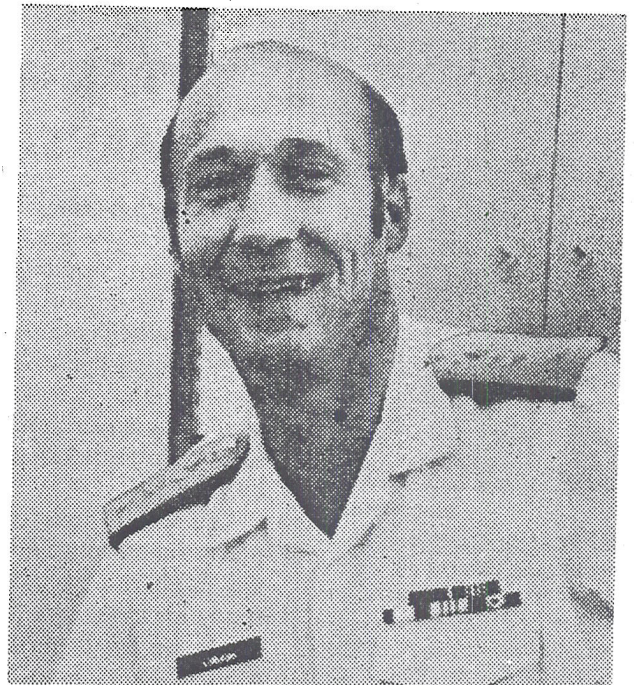
Though Mrs. Lukash is from Grand Rapids, she did not know the Fords until her husband assumed responsibility for Mr. Ford's medical care when he became Vice President.

In addition to his swimming and tennis, Admiral Lukash is a gardener, a fan of both country western music and coach of a Little League baseball team.

"My record has not been illustrious — 160 losses, 60 wins," he said with a grin. But he added, "My 10th grade basketball team did win the championship last year."

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A gift for setting his patients at ease