The award for the 2011 Rural Health Practitioner of the Year went to a Kansas physician, Dennis Kepka, MD, who retired in December from practice in Ellsworth County. In addition, he recently was honored as the 2011 Contract Employee of the Year by the Kansas Department of Corrections for his work at the Ellsworth Correctional Facility and county jails.

A native of Wilson, Dr. Kepka received the National Rural Health Association’s Rural Health Practitioner Award on May 5 during the 34th Annual Rural Health Conference in Austin, Texas.

“He has made tremendous strides to advance rural health care, and we’re confident he will continue to improve the lives of rural Kansans,” said Alan Morgan, CEO of the National Rural Health Association.

While growing up in Ellsworth County, the future doctor’s career plans were swayed by an uncle who was a general practitioner in Wilson.

When Dr. Kepka returned to the area in 1989 to practice, he continued to make house calls just as his uncle had.

Dr. Kepka has found that small communities are very appreciative of their physicians. “I’ve felt more closeness here,” he said. “In a larger city you don’t have a chance to make as much of a difference.”

After graduating from Fort Hays State University, he visited a friend in Italy and applied to the University of Bologna School of Medicine, which dates to the 11th century. After he was accepted, he had two months to learn Italian before medical school started.

“All lectures were in Italian and all of our exams were oral exams in front of the class,” he said. Many of the texts were American though and the practice of medicine was similar.

“It was a great experience. Would I do it again? Yes. It was more than going to medical school. It was Italy’s whole culture, art, food. It was a great historical, cultural experience besides learning medicine.”

While there he became adept at Italian cuisine, and his expertise at Bolognese red sauce has proved invaluable for the Ellsworth County Medical Center’s annual Auxiliary Spaghetti Supper, which since 1990 has raised nearly $70,000 for the local hospital.

After a family practice residency in Pennsylvania, he accepted a position at Hutchinson Medical Center. He worked there for a decade before returning to his roots in Ellsworth County, where his great grandfather homesteaded in 1872.

“I always had the desire to go back home,” he said.

After serving as a family practice physician at Ellsworth County Medical Center from 1989 to 1992, he established Kepka Family Practice, which included private practice clinics in Holyrood, Wilson, and Lucas. In 2000 the practice was absorbed into the Ellsworth County Medical Center Rural Health Clinic.
During more than two decades of practice in Ellsworth County, “Doc,” as he prefers to be called, started three rural health clinics, provided training for more than 30 physician assistant students, and was the sole medical provider in Ellsworth County for 19 months, meaning he was on-call round-the-clock. He also mentored and housed medical students while they did clinical rotations.

He counts among his accomplishments helping develop a more modern ambulance service—by land or air—that can get a patient to the nearest tertiary center 150 miles away in 38 minutes. “It could take longer than that in a big city,” he said.

At first he shied away from prison work. “When I started there I wasn’t that interested in doing it but there was no one else so I agreed,” he said. “After a couple of years I found I kind of liked working with these individuals. It just kind of grows on you. It’s an opportunity to diversify and get out of the family practice setting and think differently but arrive at a quality of medicine for them.”

“I’ve felt more closeness here. In a larger city you don’t have a chance to make as much of a difference.”

Dr. Dennis Kepka

He began as site physician at Ellsworth Correctional Facility (ECF) in 1989 and also served at Larned Correctional Mental Health Facility, and Saline and Barton county jails. As site physician for ECF he oversees on-site health care clinics, emergencies, infirmary care, and is always on-call.

“It’s completely different from private practice,” he said. “You’re dealing with individuals who have not taken care of themselves and have a larger drug and infectious disease history. And they sometimes are not very compliant and can be argumentative. They also are under a lot of stress. It’s very challenging.”

He and his wife Jennifer are also active in the community and helped restore the historic Midland Hotel in Wilson where the movie “Paper Moon” was filmed. He was named Citizen of the Year for Ellsworth County in 1996.

In December, he transitioned to semi-retirement, continuing to work for the prison system and in the ER in Ellsworth and Great Bend.

His bucket list for retirement is lengthy: spend time with his children and six grandchildren, paint murals, travel to Italy and other places, build log furniture, write a memoir and Italian recipe book, raise bird dogs, restore a quail habitat, fish in the northwest Canadian territories, train his horse, and help cut cattle. One of his biggest projects is restoring and remodeling an 1872 barn for use as a family retreat.