Though Thomas Simpson, MD grew up in Wichita and did his residency there, when it came time to choose a location to practice medicine he and his wife, Linda, decided on Sterling, a town of about 2,500 in Rice County.

While a resident, Dr. Simpson had “moonlighted” a weekend a month to cover for a physician in Sterling. Because of his experience there and because his wife was from a small town, Lincoln, Kan., they decided against offers from Wichita in favor of a smaller community.

In 1978, he began private practice in Sterling and established a relationship with the hospital in nearby Lyons. More than three decades and four children later, he says they’ve had absolutely no regrets.

“It was a wonderful place to raise a family,” said Dr. Thomson, who has four children and nine grandchildren.

His role in the Sterling community went far beyond that of physician. He served as a volunteer fireman, was chairman of the board of Sterling College, was a cub master and a church elder, and was elected to the city commission.

Dr. Simpson will discuss the many hats worn by rural physicians at the Kansas Career Opportunities event on Oct. 28. His presentation, which is free and open to the public, will be at 2:30 p.m. in the Roberts Amphitheater at KU School of Medicine-Wichita.

“My message to medical students is that you’re a de facto leader in your community and to take up that mantle,” he said. “I’m not ready to say it’s an obligation, but it is important to give back to the community. Besides, I had a ball as a volunteer fireman.”

Dr. Simpson first thought about being a doctor after reading a book in junior high about Dr. Tom Dooley, a missionary to Laos. Then in high school, when a friend of his mother died of breast cancer, he decided he wanted to find a cure for cancer. Up until his junior year in medical school, he’d envisioned a career as a surgeon.

Though he took every surgical subspecialty class he could as electives at the KU School of Medicine-Wichita, he found that he liked doing everything and decided during his junior year rotations that he preferred family medicine.

“In the mid-1970s, family practice was just gaining specialty status,” he said. “I decided halfway through my junior year that I’d rather do that than be a surgeon, though I still love surgery.”

For a long time he was the only physician in Sterling, but he hired a physician assistant and nurse practitioner, and then another physician joined the practice in 1994 and another in 1998. Because they do obstetrics and accept Medicaid, their patient base has extended into Reno County.

Dr. Simpson has also given back to his profession as well as his community: He has been active in the Kansas Academy of Family Physicians since 1969, serving as president in 1983 and being named Kansas Family Physician of the Year in 1992. He’s been a clinical preceptor at KU School of Medicine-Wichita since 1979 and assistant clinical professor in the department of family medicine at KUSM-W since 1981. And he’s currently on the board of the Kansas Hospital Association.

A few years ago, he thought retirement was still a ways off, but after being unable to attend a single football game of his grandson in Little River, he began to consider the idea more seriously.

So last January he stepped back from the private practice he’s had in Sterling since 1978. Two female KU Medical School graduates will be joining the practice in August with the intent of job sharing. The fact they intend to locate in Sterling and practice obstetrics “pleases me a great deal,” Simpson said.

For Dr. Simpson, retirement has meant doing locum tenens in western Kansas and working one 24-hour ER shift every week at the Great Bend Regional Hospital in addition to biking, hunting, woodworking, golfing, and, of course, spending time with his nine grandchildren.
Dr. Simpson was the guest speaker at Rural Health Education and Services’ annual career fair in Wichita in October 2010. If you would like to watch his presentation, “Hats,” which depicts all the hats a physician may wear, please visit the blog post: