

It is one thing to reach out for the extended hand. Being there when somebody needs help is another critical element of recovery.

The 2000 WBA Psychiatry honoree, Alan Brevik, M.D., is a man with an unparalleled reputation for compassion and dedication to his patients' needs. He is being honored for his efforts to raise depression awareness in the medical community, and for his unique approach to helping special populations manage the illness.

A resident of Yankton, S.D., Brevik began his medical career in family medicine. But in 1979, he went to work at a facility for the developmentally disabled. There, he found that roughly 40 percent of patients were taking psychotropic medications. This forced him to learn more about mental illness, and in the process he discovered that this was his true interest. He pursued psychiatry at the University of South Dakota while working full time, completing his residency in 1996.

"Mental health just always interested me," he says. "It seemed like it [depression] was a challenging and devastating illness, and, it turns out, very treatable."

Brevik likes to think of himself as "just a general psychiatrist."

"I'm nothing special," he says. "I just think I'm pretty representative of all psychiatrists."

But this modesty masks a lifetime of solid achievement. During his 10-year tenure at the South Dakota Developmental Center, Brevik found that depression manifests itself differently in the developmentally disabled population. When his treatment proved successful, he shared his discovery with doctors at other facilities, enabling them to better help patients who presented with similar symptoms.

Later, in his job at the South Dakota Health Services Center (SDHSC), Brevik established new protocols for the treatment of depression in patients with a dual diagnosis

of chemical dependency and mental illness. He emphasizes the importance of working with patients' families to support long-term illness management.

Brevik is a tireless crusader for improved mental health. At SDHSC, he works with the chemically dependent, geriatric patients, and in the rehab wards. He also works for Lewis & Clark Behavioral Health Services, a community facility for patients who are severely and persistently mentally ill. He is an assistant professor of psychiatry for the University of South Dakota School of Medicine, and he puts in several hours every week at a nearby federal prison.

In the past, Brevik notes, there was a tendency to downplay the effects of mental illness in rural states like South Dakota. But he thinks it's getting better. "When I was a young man," he explains, "I don't think we had more than two or three psychiatrists in the entire state. Today we have quite a few, but the rural areas are still underserved."

Brevik is working to change that, and he has no intention of giving up any time soon.

"I'm kind of an older psychiatrist. I'm getting up there, but I just plan on continuing to work," he says modestly. "I enjoy what I do."