

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • JERRY VANNATTA

A slide of a retina, the sensory membrane of the eye, is flashed on the screen.

Something is wrong with the retina, and Dr. Jerry Vannatta wants to lead his students to the technically correct answer in a nonthreatening, nontechnical way.

"What's unusual about this retina?" Vannatta asks.

It's pale in color, comes the student answer.

"That's right. And what should a normal retina look like?"

Pinkish, say some students. *Red,* offer others.

"Why does it look pink or red?" Vannatta prompts.

Because of blood supply.

"So why is this retina pale?"

Because it has no blood.

"So what's wrong?" Vannatta asks finally.

Central artery occlusion, most of the students confidently deduce.

Vannatta, associate professor of medicine, often uses the "Socratic" method of teaching, asking a series of questions that he believes the students already should know.

"The small successes and rewards build so that students arrive at the correct answer to the big question themselves," Vannatta explains. "If I had first asked students what was technically wrong with the retina, 80 percent wouldn't know.

"Medical students have a built-in fear that someone's going to get them," says Vannatta. "I try to dispel that paranoia by showing them an interest in learning something . . . instead of pointing out what they don't know."

Obviously, Vannatta, 39, is not an intimidating professor. In the nine years he has taught at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, the senior medical students four times have recognized his superior teaching with the Aesculapian Award, named for the mythical Greek god of healing.

In 1987, in addition to the Aesculapian, Vannatta also claimed the College of Medicine's top teaching prize, the fourth annual Stanton L. Young Master Teacher Award. Nominations for the \$10,000 privately funded award come from class officers and student honor society members with the dean



Jerry Vannatta, associate professor of medicine at OU's Health Sciences Center, is a recipient of the prestigious Stanton L. Young Master Teacher Award and a four-time Aesculapian Award winner.

of medicine making the final selection.

"Dr. Vannatta makes medicine both fun and interesting," wrote senior medical students in nominating Vannatta for the award. "He serves as a role model for what we students want of our professors: enthusiasm, knowledge, obvious preparation and useful information presented in such a way as to stimulate thought and generate discussion."

As director of medical education at Presbyterian Hospital, Vannatta works one-on-one with about 17 senior students each year. His elective three-week rotation is one of the most popular in the fourth year of medical school.

"The senior medical student is the perfect student," says Vannatta. "They know a lot about medicine, but they feel incompetent and vulnerable. They're like sponges—soaking up all the knowledge they can."

Elected a fellow in the American College of Physicians in 1984 and a diplomat of the American Board of Internal Medicine, Vannatta was reared on an Oklahoma Panhandle wheat farm near Keyes, between Guymon and Boise City. He earned his under-

graduate degree in 1970 from Oklahoma City University. During his freshman year there, he met his wife, Marianne, now a certified public accountant.

"She was setting the curve in my calculus class," he explains. The couple has two boys, Jeremy, 16, and Seth, 13.

After college, Vannatta taught high school algebra and chemistry for a year in Lubbock, Texas, while taking some prerequisite courses for medical school. He graduated in 1975 from OU's College of Medicine, where he also completed his internship and residency.

Vannatta had planned to practice general internal medicine in a community until his year as a chief resident.

"Teaching third-year medical students was absolutely exhilarating!" recalls Vannatta. "It was so much fun . . . I couldn't believe it." His students that year awarded him his first Aesculapian Award.

"I told myself then that the minute teaching quit being fun, I'd quit."

If the judgment of Vannatta's students is any measure, that time is a long way off.