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## Cardiologist Steven Higgins, Vice Chair XiMED Board, Puts Needs of Patient Above All Else

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The vice chair of the XiMED board, Steven Higgins, MD, FHRP, is a passionate advocate for the interests of his patients, for the cause of the independent physician and for the evolving practice of medicine and his practice specialty of cardiac electrophysiology.

"Forty percent of the patients admitted to a hospital have heart-related issues," Dr. Higgins noted. As such, heart disease is still the "number one" disease for which patients seek the care of a physician, he said.

It is about the relationship between the patient and physician that he expresses his strongest words. "Everything I do today is different than what I learned 30 years ago except for the relationship between the doctor and the patient," he observed. "While technology has made remarkable advances, the needs of the patient remain my main focus."

He noted that XiMED plays a key role in his commitment to his patients and his ability to continue to operate as an independent physician. Through XiMED, Dr. Higgins said, he is able to associate with other like-minded independent doctors enabling him to practice with the singular focus on the well being of his patients while enjoying the benefits of an affiliation with a large practice group.

"The independent physician is the best model for meeting the needs of the patient," he noted. "We are not serving the interests of different masters. We align our interest with those of the patient."

At Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, where he has been on the staff since 1985, Dr. Higgins currently serves as chairman, Department of Cardiology; director, Cardiac Electrophysiology; and co-director, Cardiac Catheterization Laboratories. Most recently Dr. Higgins has been engaged in setting up and organizing the Scripps Prebys Cardiovascular Institute (SPCI), which opened last month. Establishing a new heart hospital is a rare occurrence in the professional life of a cardiologist. "It has been a long process," he noted. "The project had four focus areas: patient care; interventional cardiology; traditional cardiology, including open heart surgery; and electrophysiology."

A state-of-the-art facility, SPCI is among the most advanced cardiac centers in the U.S. Asked about the process of setting up such a facility, Dr. Higgins noted, "it was a challenge to integrate the various medical groups who practice in the facility." These include physicians affiliated with Kaiser Permanente and Scripps Health as well as independent doctors. "Each group has a different focus on patient care," he said.

However, Dr. Higgins sees an advantage of working in close quarters with his colleagues affiliated with the medical groups. "We learn more, we see different ways of doing things, and we see more unique patients."



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Nearly 30 years ago, Dr. Higgins founded the heart arrhythmia program at Scripps after 6 years of training at the University of Colorado. He has seen the program grow from a part-time lab to now 4 full-time EP labs where he and other arrhythmia specialists perform device implantations (pacemakers, defibrillators) as well as catheter ablation procedures. Dr. Higgins has published over 140 peer reviewed manuscripts or abstracts on various topics in cardiology and cardiac electrophysiology. Presently, he is doing research on a new miniaturized pacemaker "about the size of a vitamin" that is implanted directly in the heart without a scar or leads. He also pioneered work on a special heart rhythm monitor he describes as "about the size of a Band-Aid." It records up to 14 days of heart rhythm data, which he frequently uses in the office to help diagnose intermittent heart rhythm issues.

Despite his many administrative roles, Dr. Higgins first love is patient care. He states, "It is so gratifying to see a patient whose life is prolonged due to the advances in cardiology. I love to hear stories about children, grandchildren and other life events that were enjoyed only because of the care available today."

With all the changes to the practice setting, with all the advances in technology, Dr. Higgins notes that, in his practice, "it still comes down to what benefits the individual patient."

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