



Winding through the rural roads of north central Illinois, 170 bicyclists endure a chilly morning with air just this side of frost lying in the low areas of the valley. It's early September, and the rural roads are lined with fields of half-harvested corn, soybeans and pumpkins.

As the sun awakens, the 48-degree temperature rises 25 degrees, and the bicyclists strip off arm warmers and jackets to reveal their jerseys, many sporting the logos of their journey: the Illinois Great Rivers Ride, a five-day, 325-mile ride from Chicago to Springfield. As the group passes through Pekin, Ill., on the fourth day, they're still smiling.

SIU School of Medicine surgeon John Sutyak, M.D., is riding his trusty red LeMond Buenos Aires bicycle, whose purchase date three years ago is marked on his calendar like the birth of a child. It's his third year riding in the Great Rivers Ride and volunteering as the ride's medical director, ready to help should anyone take a fall or suffer more serious collision.

Thankfully, this year's ride is injury-free, allowing Dr. Sutyak to enjoy the Illinois landscape. "Bicycling is good exercise, and you have to completely focus on the traffic and the road," says Dr. Sutyak as he takes a break at the lunch stop at the corner of Route 136 and Route 29, just north of Mason City.

Riding through the small communities of SIU School of Medicine's service area is a great way to meet his patients. "I get a feel for the people, and the folks are all so nice. I get a flavor for what the towns are like."

As a busy surgeon, Dr. Sutyak says his erratic schedule makes it tough to find time for bicycling, but he gets to ride his favorite routes around the city streets and bicycle trails three or four times a week when he's not on call, leaving about 100 miles per week in the dust behind him. "With a bicycle, I can just pick up and go."

He first began bicycling while living in the hillier New Jersey, where he was associate professor of surgery of University of Medicine and Dentistry at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. After a few years there, Dr. Sutyak felt professionally stagnant and could not find the commitment to surgical education that he was looking for, particularly in the new surgical skills labs he was hearing about. Plus, he wanted to spend more time with his wife and two sons. "In New Jersey, it's a 45 minute commute to anywhere, from work to home to my son's soccer game." He touched base with his friend, Gary Dunnington, M.D., who was looking for a trauma surgeon with an interest in education to take over the Southern Illinois Trauma Center from Dr. William Schiller, who planned to retire. Dr. Sutyak joined SIU School of Medicine in 2001 as associate professor, Division of General Surgery and associate director for the Southern Illinois Trauma Center. At SIU, he found the right combination of surgery, trauma care and

Pick Up & *GO*

*Whether bicycling on country roads,
teaching surgical skills,
or directing the trauma center,*

Dr. John Sutyak keeps a good pace

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker





commitment to education — and a 15-minute commute. “It was perfect, absolutely perfect,” he says.

The serenity of bicycling largely deserted roads in rural Illinois is a stark contrast to the daily bustle of the Southern Illinois Trauma Center (SITC) in Springfield, where Dr. Sutzyak is working the week following the Great Rivers Ride.

The trauma center, which opened in 1999, alternates each year between St. John’s Hospital, where it has been for the last year, and Memorial Medical Center, which will host the SITC on January 1.

“The need for trauma care is growing because fewer physicians and hospitals are providing these services,” says Dr. Sutzyak, noting bad hours, very poor reimbursement, and malpractice exposures as reasons why hospitals shy away from trauma care. So it is unique for two hospitals to vie for such a heavy drain on resources as a trauma center, but both Springfield hospitals are keenly interested in maintaining the partnership with SIU School of Medicine and have been wonderful supports. “That says a lot about the hospitals’ commitment to the community,” Dr. Sutzyak says. “They give us the best of whatever we need.”

Dr. Sutzyak also credits the success of the trauma center to the hard work and commitment of the clinical team, including Christopher D. Wohltmann, M.D., assistant professor in the SIU Division of General Surgery, and 11 other SIU surgeons and physicians from other medical centers in the area as well as the busy team of administrators who keep everything running smoothly.

While talking to Dr. Sutzyak in his office at St. John’s Hospital, he receives a page from the Trauma Center: a man has been injured by a tractor. Dr. Sutzyak is happy to talk about his work but is eager to go to the patient.

Trauma care is in effect, a combined Emergency Room and ICU unit for the most severe injuries. Car crashes, motorcycle crashes, gunshots, stab wounds — all are part of the trauma scene. The doctors caring for patients at the Trauma Center will see them through their entire hospital stay and beyond, from admission, rehabilitation, and even outpatient care.

The SITC provides Level 1 care — the most sophisticated care available to patients who are helicoptered or driven in from 18 counties all over the central and southern part of the state. To maintain the Level 1 designation, a trauma surgeon must serve as director.

The SITC has averaged about 1,100 patients per year since it opened, with the majority being motor vehicle crashes. Within minutes, patients have access to state-of-the-art equipment, surgical suites, and the best providers in medical care.

“Ten to twelve people may be treating a patient simultaneously,” Dr. Sutyak says. “We’ve got enough support to do it.” Small towns, he explains, simply don’t have the medical resources to give patients the lifesaving care they may need. At the SITC, surgical specialties are available within 30 minutes — another requirement of Level 1 care.

Dr. Sutyak cites an example of the impact of the trauma center. One

“I can think of no better way to be a doctor than to see somebody walk out of the hospital who — in another hospital without the quality of resources — wouldn’t make it. It’s a privilege to see that.” – Dr. Sutyak

Christmas morning, a car crash brought a 15-year-old to the SITC from a small Illinois town. “The doctors in her hometown recognized her severe injuries — a ruptured spleen. But by the time all the doctors and medical staff could get to the hospital from their homes in rural areas, the patient could be helicoptered to Springfield.” Dr. Sutyak arrived at the trauma center within minutes, taking the patient directly to the OR to remove her spleen. She was back at school in a few weeks. Another teen had a ruptured aorta after crashing his ATV. “Within six minutes, the emergency department doctor saw the degree of injury and called for a helicopter transfer. A cardiac surgeon is available here — not every town has one available.”

What draws Dr. Sutyak to these severe cases? “There’s no other profession where you literally can have somebody who should be dead survive and live a normal life,” he says. “I can think of no better way to be a doctor than to see somebody walk out of the hospital who — in another hospital without the quality of resources — wouldn’t make it. It’s a privilege to see that.” While a busy surgeon taking care of the most severe injuries could easily favor prompt care over compassion, Dr. Sutyak blends the quick-thinking intelligence of a top surgeon with a friendly, warm and caring demeanor. He emphasizes that taking care of patients’ families is a big part of his job, including educating patients and their families about the illness and outcomes.

With improved diagnostics of CAT scans and ultrasounds, trauma care is becoming more and more non-operative — a great benefit for patients. “The outcomes are much improved,” he says. Studies have shown that trauma care markedly reduces complications, death rates, and disability. A nationwide study by Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and the University of Washington School of Medicine found that trauma center care lowers risk of death by 25 percent compared to care at nontrauma centers.

In addition to managing a sophisticated trauma center, Dr. Sutyak also has the opportunity at SIU to work with the educational tool he yearned for: a state-of-the-art surgical skills lab.

“SIU handed me a fully funded, extraordinarily well-staffed, extremely well supported skills lab,” says the physician supervisor who thoroughly enjoys teaching up-and-coming surgeons who are eager to pick up and get into the operating room. The Lab gives them a calm environment to build their skills like an athlete training for a triathlon. “When you first ride a bike, you don’t ride a century [a 100-mile ride],” Dr. Sutyak explains. “You don’t know how to shift, or ride hills. You learn how to make decisions by repetition to the point where it’s automatic.” The same theory applies to the skills lab, and Dr. Sutyak is constantly working to improve the simulated training, often based on feedback from the residents.

While the Surgical Skills Lab is the stationary bicycle of medicine, the only

way to understand the bumps in the road, the stress of traffic, the twists turns and hills of varying roads is just to get out there and do it. There’s still nothing like the operating room as a teaching environment, Dr. Sutyak says. “Real tissues are different. They feel different; they look different. An

80-year-old’s heart is different from a 20-year-old’s.”

Education is everywhere at SIU. Dr. Sutyak adds that both inside and outside the operating room, “every physician has to be an educator.” He has a master’s degree in education from Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. “Teaching makes you a better doctor. You stay up on things and don’t stagnate. Plus it’s cool to watch a resident or medical student progress from a neophyte to a full-fledged surgeon who you would let operate on you or your family.”

This autumn, Dr. Sutyak received the first leadership award from the Department of Surgery for his work with the trauma center. He also was honored for his efforts in resident education.

“Teaching is a multiplication of your efforts,” he says. “That’s cool.”

Eager to get to his trauma patient, Dr. Sutyak puts on his white coat, specially embroidered with the logo of the Southern Illinois Trauma Center. “My wife will tell you that I work harder here than I did in Jersey, but I also have more personal time. And I’m much happier with what I’m doing.” His wife, Wendee, and son, Tim, 14, joined Dr. Sutyak on the last day of The Great Rivers Ride. His younger son Sean, 9, likely will soon be on the road with his dad, too. During a recent business trip to Las Vegas, Dr. Sutyak rented a bike to get a different view of Sin City from the saddle of a Cannondale. In addition to bicycling, Dr. Sutyak enjoys soccer games with medical students and faculty.

Dr. Sutyak walks briskly down the hall toward the trauma center, winding through the halls of St. John’s Hospital to Trauma Bay 1, where indeed, a team of physicians nurses and medical staff are surrounding the patient. Within minutes, the man is quickly wheeled to an X-ray room just six feet away. Calm yet quick-paced, the Trauma Center is in action, and Dr. Sutyak keeps the cadence. ●●●