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Below the sock line, doc is tops

An Eagan surgeon who hails from South Africa treats many of Minnesota's trickiest foot and ankle injuries.

By Sarah Lemagie, Star Tribune

Chris Coetzee's wife was making a purchase at a clothing shop in Edina when the woman behind the register looked at her credit card and said, "I know you. I'm a patient of your husband's." "Oh," said Linda Coetzee, wondering if she needed to brace for a tirade about bunions. "Well, are you satisfied?"

Yes, indeed. Dr. Coetzee happened to be outside the store, and the woman called him in and rounded up her sales associates so she could sing his praises publicly. Shoes were shed, and before the Coetzees knew it, "There he was in the middle of the shop, looking at all their feet," Linda said.

Bunions, broken toes, ankle arthritis: Chris Coetzee has treated them all.

Yet Coetzee (pronounced "coat-SEE-ah") is no podiatrist. The Eagan resident, who sees patients two days a week at a clinic in Eden Prairie, is a highly trained orthopedic surgeon specializing in the kind of foot and ankle procedures that perhaps only 100 physicians in the country do.

Coetzee focuses on tricky cases that require cutting-edge procedures or that other doctors have failed to cure. Among other things, Coetzee does about 90 percent of the ankle replacements in Minnesota, he estimated. (Ankle replacements -- unlike hip and knee replacements -- have only become common in the past 10 or 15 years, partly because the joint is more complicated.)

The specialty is not glamorous. "Everyone wants to do hip or knee replacements, or sports medicine," said Coetzee, who was raised in South Africa and studied medicine there. But feet? "Low on the totem pole."

Coetzee's choice, plus his reputation as a skilled surgeon and researcher, prompted the University of Minnesota to recruit him to fill an academic post eight years ago. Though he has since left the university to pursue a private practice, Coetzee is here to stay: He and his family are set to become U.S. citizens today.

Injured toes, fractured heels

Despite grueling clinic days that sometimes start at 7:10 a.m. and feature as many as 60 patients, Coetzee is anything but rushed.

A recent Wednesday morning found him moving from room to room at Minnesota Sports Medicine's clinic in Eden Prairie. While one door down his previous patient put a sock back on a foot with an injured toe, Coetzee sat down to remove stitches from a woman who'd had bunion surgery. In the cramped exam room, the tanned 46-year old with curly white hair spoke quietly in his marked accent, touching his patient's foot gently as he cut stitches away from

the maroon gashes that crisscrossed it.

Twenty minutes later, he checked in with a private pilot whose foot got the worst of things when he crashed into a lake in northern Minnesota.

He also treats his fair share of heel fractures, an injury usually suffered in industrial accidents in most parts of the United States. Minnesotans, however, seem to break their heels, Coetzee said, when they slip off ladders while stringing Christmas lights or shoveling snow from roofs. Coetzee says he sees a spike in the injuries every holiday season.

And, he said, he sees many of the professional and college athletes in the state with serious foot and ankle injuries, though as a group, he conceded, athletes are not his easiest patients. "They want to be back playing within a short period of time," he said. "That's whether you're a first-grader or a professional athlete."

A respected researcher

Elite athletes make up a small slice of his practice, though, and Coetzee is known better for his research, including development, with two other doctors, of a new ankle replacement. The new device -- a cobalt-and-chrome piece that takes the place of damaged bone -- has yet to clear FDA hurdles but has been available abroad for more than two years.

"Chris has the best data on ankle replacement of anybody in the world," said Marc Swiontkowski, chairman of the orthopedic surgery department at the University of Minnesota. Swiontkowski, who recruited Coetzee and helped smooth his path to board certification in the United States -- a difficult process for even the most gifted internationally trained doctors -- praised Coetzee's meticulous data collection.

"Quite frankly, other surgeons haven't been willing to go to that level of compulsion."

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