

NAVY SEALS OF THE DENTAL WORLD

**BLUE WATER ORAL & FACIAL SURGERY
OFFERS SPECIALIZED CARE TO THE NORTHLAND**



By Patrick Lapinski

Dr. Scott K. Varland, DDS, is in the prime of his career as an oral and facial surgeon in a highly specialized and competitive field. His patients come to him in many cases as a last resort, looking for a result that few others could guarantee.

As an oral surgeon, Varland is in an elite group of dental practitioners whose educational career path provided them more training than a medical doctor receives, as well as the training and licensure to perform anesthesiology on patients during surgery. They're kind of like the Navy Seals of the dental world.

Varland will be the first to tell you he's not a miracle maker. His work is backed by sound medical training and research, the highest quality equipment and a caring, compassionate attitude that extends to the staff who attend to the patient procedures. He will also tell you that Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery is the place to go if you want to be treated by the best in the business.





Unpacking what they do as specialists, Dr. Varland says they operate as a team across all four of the Blue Water clinic locations, rotating as a staff on a weekly basis,

office-based practice. As part of our coverage for the hospital, we also take facial trauma calls and head and neck infection calls," says Varland.

"Our specialty kind of straddles hospital-based practice with clinic office-based practice."

- DR. SCOTT K. VARLAND, DDS, PRESIDENT - BLUE WATER ORAL & FACIAL SURGERY

Varland, president of Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery, along with his fellow practitioners, Dr. Nathan A. Jarrot, and Dr. Eric B. Scotland, are the nucleus of the Blue Water surgical team.

ensuring all locations have access to the same level of care. He says they also cover calls from Essentia Health hospital, as well as in-office appointments.

"I'm actually the section chief for oral surgery at both Saint Mary's and at Essentia Health Duluth," says Varland. He explains, "Our specialty kind of straddles hospital-based practice with clinic

He says the group practice is more practical and gives the patients flexibility. "If we were by ourselves, we'd be on call a lot more often. When you have a group practice it allows us to have more locations, and actually have enough staff and doctors to service all those locations. It also helps with being able to offer more services to our patients, being able to



take vacation and things like that because you have someone else to help cover some of that stuff."

When he started college, Varland wasn't sure what he was going to do, not unlike most people that age. "I was thinking of a variety of different career options, one of which would have been medical school. I wasn't even thinking dental school. I was thinking medical school or grad school in something like genetics or biomedical engineering."

While Varland was in college he received a state grant that led him down an unexpected path, and directly into a person who would have a huge influence on his career choices.

"I was an EMT, and I worked on an ambulance service in college, as well as being an EMT for the college itself. One summer, I got a grant from the Minnesota Hospital Association to work at a hospital for the summer, as one of



Dr. Nathan Jarrot, DDS, MD

my jobs. I worked on the ambulance service as an EMT, but also during part of my shift day, I was working as a medical assistant of sorts. I would shadow doctors and nurses and help them with various things around the hospital. Because it was a grant, I got to rotate through different departments and different services and whatnot. I grew up in a small town in southern Minnesota, but the town did not have an oral surgeon, at first.



Then," recalls Varland, "there was an oral surgeon that was semi-retiring and coming back to New Ulm, where he was from originally, to kind of slow down and kind of wind down towards retirement. I got to interact with him quite a bit, and he was just so in love with his specialty. He was in his 60s, still practicing, and he was so passionate about it.

"I got to shadow him quite a bit, and just his enthusiasm for it, and just the scope of practice of things that he got to be involved with at our small hospital, but also things that he had been involved with when he worked at Mayo Clinic, when he worked in the Marshfield clinic, when he worked in Milwaukee. It just sounded very interesting to me," recalled Varland.



Dr. Eric Scotland, DDS

The interactions with the older doctor changed the course of his career. "I was in college at the time. I was thinking of a variety of different career options, one of which would have been medical school. He basically, unintentionally, led me down a path of I should think about this oral surgery stuff,



and that's what I ended up doing. I ended up just focusing and switching everything over to pre-dentistry with the intention of going to dental school and becoming an oral surgeon."

FORTY-SIX YEARS IN DULUTH

Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery has been around a long time, founded in Duluth in 1969. Today, the surgery operates four clinics

and employs about 25, mostly full-time staff. Katherine LaFleur, the Practice Administrator for Blue Water, talked about the daily operations of the clinics from her office in Duluth. "Our primary clinic is here in Duluth, Minnesota, and then we have three other satellite clinics, one in Superior that two of our surgeons practice at, and then two up on the Iron Range, one in Grand Rapids, and one in Virginia."





The medical staff assisting the surgeons consists of licensed practical nurses who have the background for drawing and administering drugs, especially scheduled drugs. In addition, they have licensed dental assistants

LaFleur handles the daily paperwork and administrative duties. "I do accounts payable, and then we have our billing team, our business team here in the office handles our accounts receivable. We have three dental billers who split up the workload between the four offices to make sure that our insurance claims are going out and getting paid in a timely fashion, and keeping our patient ledgers up to date."

The Blue Water business team is located at the Duluth office. "Everybody's kind of onsite here," explains LaFleur. "In our Northland office, Janelle has been with our team since, gosh, I feel like 2011. She's been here a long time, OK?" laughs LaFleur. "She runs all of the

don't go to a specialist without a referral. Blue Water receives most of their patients via a network of local and regional dentists, among other sources. LaFleur is quick to point out, "We don't do examinations or cleanings the way that a general dentist does. Typically, patients are routed through their general dentist for whatever need



"We're very fortunate, our surgeons are some of the most humble and caring individuals I've ever met."

- KATHERINE LAFLEUR, PRACTICE ADMINISTRATOR - BLUE WATER ORAL & FACIAL SURGERY

who handle the assisting and radiology aspect of the job. All the Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery nursing staff and dental assisting staff rotate through the available clinical days in all four offices, the same as the surgeons.

billing for our Northland office, which is obviously our largest, and then each of the satellite clinics handle their own."

Anyone who has navigated the health care system knows you

that they have. That dentist would either determine that, say a tooth is not restorable, so not eligible for or not viable for a filling or any other restorable work that they could do, they then typically send them our

way to either have an extraction or, in advanced cases, we partner with endodontists, prosthodontists and orthodontists, especially for, say, cases where a patient has some sort of skeletal deformity or needs an orthognathic surgery in order to solve issues that they're having with their bite, with the way that their jaw aligns."

LaFleur believes a minuscule fact – that Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery is one of only two oral surgery companies covering a huge swath of land in Northern Minnesota – is pivotal to the story. She says it reflects a shortage of oral surgeons nationwide; a "pretty astounding shortage" says LaFleur. "Typically, we cover all Northeastern Minnesota, but we're kind of constantly accepting patients from further out into the margins, further west and further south, just based on the need, and then all of Northwestern Wisconsin, which again, is also similarly pushing further east and further south into the state."

LaFleur says they have seen "a pretty big uptick in patients coming to us by way of the U.P., because they're ending up traveling to, say, Ashland or Bayfield to receive dental care. It's kind of like the crux of there not being enough dentists who accept specific insurances, there not being enough oral surgeons to cover that need."

Many of the patients who seek treatment at Blue Water are among the most vulnerable residents. The teams at Blue Water make every effort to make their patients comfortable and relaxed during their visit to the clinics. Patient interaction is critical to the successful outcome so all avenues of the patient's health and outcome are examined.

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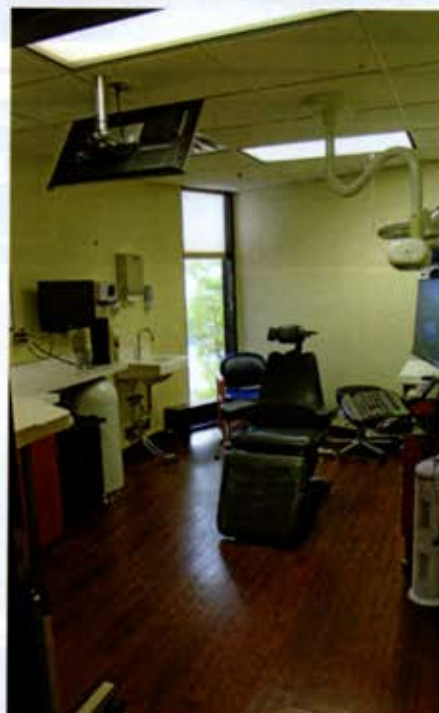
humble and caring individuals I've ever met," says LaFleur. "As surgeons, they really prioritize patient care. Each of them has a very strong drive to serve these populations, those that are on medical assistance or disability, or those who end up pretty much on the margins of the health care industry in general. They really want to provide the best possible service to these folks who are often coming to us stigmatized."

LaFleur explained that societal factors often end up determining a person's access to dental care, and how that lack of access ends up negatively compounding over time. "I'm really quite proud of our team, I think they do an excellent job of putting people at ease, helping them understand the process. So much of it is patient education... I think there's a lot of folks that come here with a lot of fear and trauma attached to being in a dental setting."

It's a broad scope field, adds Dr. Varland. "We do everything from wisdom teeth and taking out baby teeth, adult teeth and doing dental implants all the way up to facial reconstruction, facial trauma, cleft lip and palate, corrective jaw surgery, TMJ surgery, facial cosmetic surgery, (like plastic surgery), head and neck, cancer reconstructions and cancer surgery. That's all part of the specialty. Not everybody does all of that, but we're all trained in the basics of all of that. We're all licensed by the state to be anesthesia providers as well. We're the only specialty that has that, licensed anesthesiologists."

As a patient, be assured that you are choosing the best surgical team to help resolve your health issue. The oral surgeons at Blue Water have undergone extensive training. In fact, for college level students interested in a career as

an oral surgeon, it is a large time commitment. It's a rigorous process Varland describes as "a difficult field," in the sense that, you have to go through college and do well enough to get into dental school.





"Dental school and medical school for the first two years are basically identical. You're doing all the same classes, actually taking them all together. Then, in the second half, the medical students kind of go down a path of doing pediatrics and obstetrics, psychiatry and all that sort of thing, in addition to general medicine. The dental school students go down a slightly different path in that we go down pediatric dentistry, orthodontics and oral surgery and periodontics and so on and so forth. That's where it kind of differs."

Varland explained why it is such a difficult field of study. "Most dentists graduate and just go straight into general dentistry. About 15 to 20 percent of dental graduates end up going into some sort of specialty, and the specialties are very competitive. There could be 100 applicants for every open position. These are all people that did well in dental school and are going to compete for highly selective positions."

Varland explained that there are about 100 residencies in the whole country, and they produce

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Eric Scotland, DDS
Scott Varland, DDS
Nathan Jarnot, DDS, MD



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about 250 to 300 residents that graduate every year. The residencies are four to six years long. "After four years of college and four years dental school, you're doing another four to six years of residency, afterwards. During that time, the six-year programs also incorporate medical school in that so you've actually finished medical school as well as dental school."

The patient is the most important person in the equation at Blue Water Oral & Facial Surgery. Katherine LaFleur appreciates every person who walks across their threshold. The Blue Water mission is "to help patients live healthier lives. We provide a caring, nurturing environment where your comfort and health is of primary importance."

LaFleur wants you to know that the surgical team at Blue Water are part of their community. "These are Duluthians; these are folks who love to live and work in this town and provide a service that's so desperately needed by other Duluthians. It's not lost on me that we are really fortunate to have the surgeons we do, and our patients are fortunate to end up in their care just because of how talented and thorough they are. There is a lot of pride in the work we do. It's not glamorous, and people do not like coming to see us, and yet, every day, our team shows up and really tries to make it the best possible experience for every single patient that comes to see us." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.

