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## THIS MAN IS SHOCK TRAUMA

Dr. Thomas Scalea  
refuses to slow  
down as he readies  
a new generation of  
trauma doctors.

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BY JACLYN BOROWSKI

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## YOU'RE VULNERABLE TO ATTACKS

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## COVER STORY

# SCALEA FINDS LIFE IN SHOCK TRAUMA

BY SARAH GANTZ

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**D**r. Thomas Scalea works 110 of the 168 hours there are in a week.

The physician-in-chief at the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore clocks more than a full workweek – between 60 and 70 hours – just taking care of patients. Scalea works holidays, he'll leave baseball games and duck out of dinner parties he planned if a patient needs him. He's also the hospital's top administrator, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and president of one of the most prestigious surgical societies in the country.

Scalea's entire life – or at least nearly every waking moment of it – is for Shock Trauma and the patients brought back from the brink of death in its operating rooms.

"In his world he is committed to Shock Trauma Center, and Shock Trauma Center is committed to him. They are one in the same," said Dr. Joseph Scalea, his nephew. "He doesn't want to be away from an evening he planned, but it's who he is. It's not what he does for work. He is the Shock Trauma Center."

And he never wanted any of it.

Scalea didn't know what he wanted to do when he left his childhood home in Rochester, N.Y., but he knew what he didn't want to do. Medicine.

He applied to the Medical College of Virginia on a dare from college buddies who bet he couldn't get in. He accepted because he'd been rejected from the graduate psychology program he really wanted and was working in a factory. Once enrolled in medical school, Scalea chose surgery because it seemed like "the least onerous" specialty.

Decades later Scalea, 63, is not only a doctor but one of the best in the business. Since taking over Shock Trauma in 1997, he has elevated the state-supported trauma center to be one of the premier trauma facilities in the world, with a 96 percent survival rate treating gunshot victims, head-on car collisions and other worst-case scenarios. Now Scalea, who never married and has no children, is turning his attention to the future doctors, nurses and hospital staff who will need to steer the ship when – if – he ever retires.

At a time when pressure to see more patients

and become the next miracle-worker surgeon can overshadow the real reason people go into health care, Scalea is leading by example to teach the next generation an important lesson: You can be a rockstar and still care about the little people.

"Tom Scalea is an icon," said Francis X. Kelly Jr., the former state senator and chairman of Shock Trauma's board of visitors for the past 30 years. "He walks into a room and just everyone comes to attention. He's got movie-star qualities."







BY JACLYN BOROWSKI

Organized chaos

About 20 minutes ago emergency medical technicians called about a man who fell and was having a seizure. He'll be the Friday night shift's first patient.

The cleaning crew is mopping up a bay for the incoming patient, techs are pulling in new equipment and nurses are rushing between patient beds when Scalea shows up. With his arms crossed and head bent down, listening to a rundown of the night's patients, he stands out from the worker bees who are too busy to

Shock Trauma's night team awaits patients.

15-20 HOURS  
TEACHING, WRITING, ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP

20-30 HOURS  
ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

AROUND THE CLOCK

Full-time U.S. workers, on average, clock a 47-hour work week, according to Gallup. Dr. Thomas Scalea logs 110 hours per week. Here's how he spends it:

60-70 HOURS  
SURGERY, TAKING CARE OF PATIENTS

BY JACLYN BOROWSKI

"Tom Scalea is an icon. He walks into a room and just everyone comes to attention. He's got movie-star qualities."

FRANCIS X. KELLY JR.,  
former state senator and chairman of Shock Trauma's board

stand still.

Everything and everyone is ready when EMTs roll in the man who fell. A swarm of doctors and nurses all have their hands on him before the stretcher stops moving. They cut off his clothes, hook him up to monitors and give him oxygen all at once.

This is what Scalea calls the ballet of organized chaos.

Scalea stands just outside the bay's curtains, watching the performance. Every so often he gets closer, the way you lean in toward the stage to see if anyone will catch that ballerina who was just tossed, spinning, into the air. But he doesn't pounce. He's trained his troupe well and they have this one under control.

"This is his shop. Shock Trauma is his place," said Karen Doyle, the vice president of nursing and operations at Shock Trauma. "He takes accountability for it. But he's respectful and approachable and allows people their autonomy within their roles."

Shock Trauma has been an impressive place since it was founded in 1961 on the radical idea that if doctors could get to a patient within an hour, they could save him. Scalea, whose salary was \$299,210 in 2014, has reorganized the hospital to improve efficiency over the past 18 years of his tenure. He played a leading role in planning the hospital's new \$160 million tower, which opened in 2013. Facility improvements paired with the calculated approach to emergency care Scalea demands from the 850 people who there are largely why the hospital can see

nearly 8,000 patients a year, 38 percent more than the day Scalea arrived.

"They cry. I cry."

Scalea leads by example, which is why his role as an administrator is secondary to being a doctor. As a doctor, Scalea is all in. He knows about every patient who comes into his hospital and is the one operating on hundreds of them. He's also the one to take care of their sister or mother or half-cousin who, years later, needs an operation and remembers the miracle Scalea worked. He could cut back on the number of surgeries he performs, somewhere between 550 and 600 a year. Or at least hand off to another doctor less severe cases or followup visits. Delegate. He is the boss, after all.

"Do you ever say no?" I ask Scalea, as we sit in his office. Scalea doesn't spend much time lounging in his office chatting, but it's a slow Friday night.

"No," he says, without pause or intention of explaining.

"Why not?" I venture.

Maybe there's no such thing as a stupid question, but Scalea's blank stare indicates this is close.

"Because somebody asked me for help," he finally says, explaining the obvious.

A surgeon's job is to help the people in need, not to cherry-pick which patients are sick enough to get attention. A few extra hours at the hospital or coming in to help a patient is worth it, Scalea elaborates.

"My mother, who is now 94, always told me you do for others before you do for yours—," Scalea says, stopping mid-sentence to glance at his buzzing beeper. "Time to go."

Walking down the hall, riding up the elevator, Scalea stares ahead without saying a word. His mind is always three steps ahead of his body. He told me earlier that's the only way to handle the constant stream of high-stakes emergencies, like the gunshot victim waiting upstairs.

Surgeons must compartmentalize their feelings – stop thinking about the fact that the man on the table could die if you make the wrong move and just react. Pressure is a perception,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14



A SAMPLING OF THE TITLES AND ACCOLADES OF DR. THOMAS SCALEA:

Physician-in-chief, R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center

Francis X. Kelly Professorship in Trauma Surgery, University of Maryland School of Medicine

President, American Association for the Surgery of Trauma

Speaker's Medallion Award, Maryland House of Delegates, 2006

Trauma Nursing Leadership Award, Society of Trauma Nurses, 2006

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

he told me. If you don't feel pressure, you're not under pressure. Operating at Shock Trauma is an out-of-body experience.

A shocking 96 percent of the time, everything works out. But then there's the other 4 percent who don't survive. Handling that 4 percent takes an equal amount of discipline.

"When I talk to families I hold their hands. They cry. I cry," Scalea said. "When someone dies, it should suck."

Tonight isn't a 4 percent night. Scalea is out the elevator door before it's fully opened, ready to try to bring back to life the gunshot victim. But it's a false alarm – the patient ended up at another hospital.

"Whatever you do, he can fix"

Scalea's career is defined by miraculous, life-saving surgeries. Putting back together a patient who came in looking like Humpty Dumpty after he took a spill is a high like no other. The fact that, after three days, his patient finally had a bowel movement? Scalea celebrates that, too.

Every night around dinnertime, Scalea and his team of residents, a nurse and a physician's assistant check in on all their recovering patients. Flanked by his posse, Scalea swaggers into each patient's room like he's arriving at a party that's waiting on him to start.

If he's tired after being on the clock for 35 hours, it's hidden behind the animation in his face when his patient says she's feeling better today, the patience in his voice as he recites answers to questions he's heard a dozen times before.

This is the skill medical residents

"He helps raise us. He sends these fellows out into the world and they take a little piece of his vision and his teaching with him."

TIFFANY HEIN, a physician's assistant on Scalea's service for seven years

come from all over to learn from Scalea – the confidence to dive in to a high-risk surgery with only seconds to devise a plan of attack, the confidence to know that caring deeply about your patient's next bowel movement doesn't jeopardize your status as a hotshot surgeon.

"He has this presence. You don't ever want to cross him but you want to learn that confidence," said Dr. Jigar Patel, a 31-year-old resident with Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who is studying with Scalea for three months. Shock Trauma is the closest Patel and other residents from the Bethesda military hospital will ever get to combat injuries on American soil. There are countless techniques to learn, but what these doctors want most is to absorb Scalea's self-assuredness and discipline.

They all leave wanting to be trauma surgeons just like Scalea, even if they had other plans. Patel wants to be a vascular surgeon but is now considering vascular trauma.

It's nearly impossible to be around Scalea and not want to be like him, said his nephew Dr. Joseph Scalea, 34, who studied at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, trained under his uncle and lived with him for a year.

"He trains by getting people to buy

in," he said.

At home, Scalea put his nephew in charge of stocking the cabinet with wine after coming home one night to find it dry. Joseph Scalea knew nothing about wine but quickly learned. He had to: This was his responsibility now.

Scalea takes the same approach at the hospital. His patients are his residents' patients.

"When you realize your ideas are getting the respect of this very respected person, it puts the ball in your court," Joseph Scalea said.

Scalea lets his students come up with harebrained surgical plans and bring home subpar Barolo wine because there's nothing he can't fix with a few flicks of his fingers or a pan of his killer seafood lasagna.

Being the mentor, the leader, the star surgeon – it all takes its toll. Everyone needs a release, especially a guy clocking as many hours in the pressure cooker as Scalea. He used to run. Forty miles a week, when he was training. Now he trains at the gym, an hour at a time, six days a week. He says it's well worth the time.

That's the thing about Scalea. He makes time for the things and people he thinks are worth his time. He just hasn't found that much worth his while. It's why he'll probably never retire, or at least has no plans to.

"I don't get what retiring is," Scalea said. "OK, so you don't have to set an alarm. You can sleep in, you wake up, go out on the porch, have some coffee, breakfast. By then it's 9 or 10. Now what?"

His gears are really turning now.

"I hate golf. I have lots of things I like doing," he says. "I just don't think it's a life-worth of activity."

TITLES CONTINUED

Honorary Maryland State Trooper Award, Maryland State Police, 2007

Special Achievement Award in Science and Medicine, National Italian American Foundation, 2010

Lifetime Achievement Award in Trauma Resuscitation Science, American Heart Association, 2011

Gold DOC Award, Arnold P. Gold Foundation, 2013

Outstanding Medical Alumnus Award, Medical College of Virginia, 2013



Dr. Scalea leads evening rounds with his team at Shock Trauma.