



Adrian Ryan sutures up a head wound of a man injured when he was hit by a truck. Ryan, an Alaska Native from Unalakleet, has six months to go before finishing medical school.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

## Life's tragedies led to medical career

By Bill Hess  
Tundra Times

A middle-aged man who has just been hit by a truck lies very still on the emergency room bed as Adrian Ryan intently studies a nasty-looking wound on the side of his head. Carefully, Ryan pokes a curved needle through the flesh on one side of the wound.

He then hooks the needle through the skin on the other side of the laceration and stitches the flesh back together the way it should be. "I enjoy

working in here the most," Ryan says. "It gives me a chance to perform minor surgery like this."

Ryan, an Alaska Native raised in the Norton Sound village of Unalakleet, is a 27-year-old medical student at the University of Washington with plans to graduate in six months. He is working at the Alaska Native Medical center in Anchorage on a short "family medicine rotation" to fill a graduation requirement.

His work is supervised by

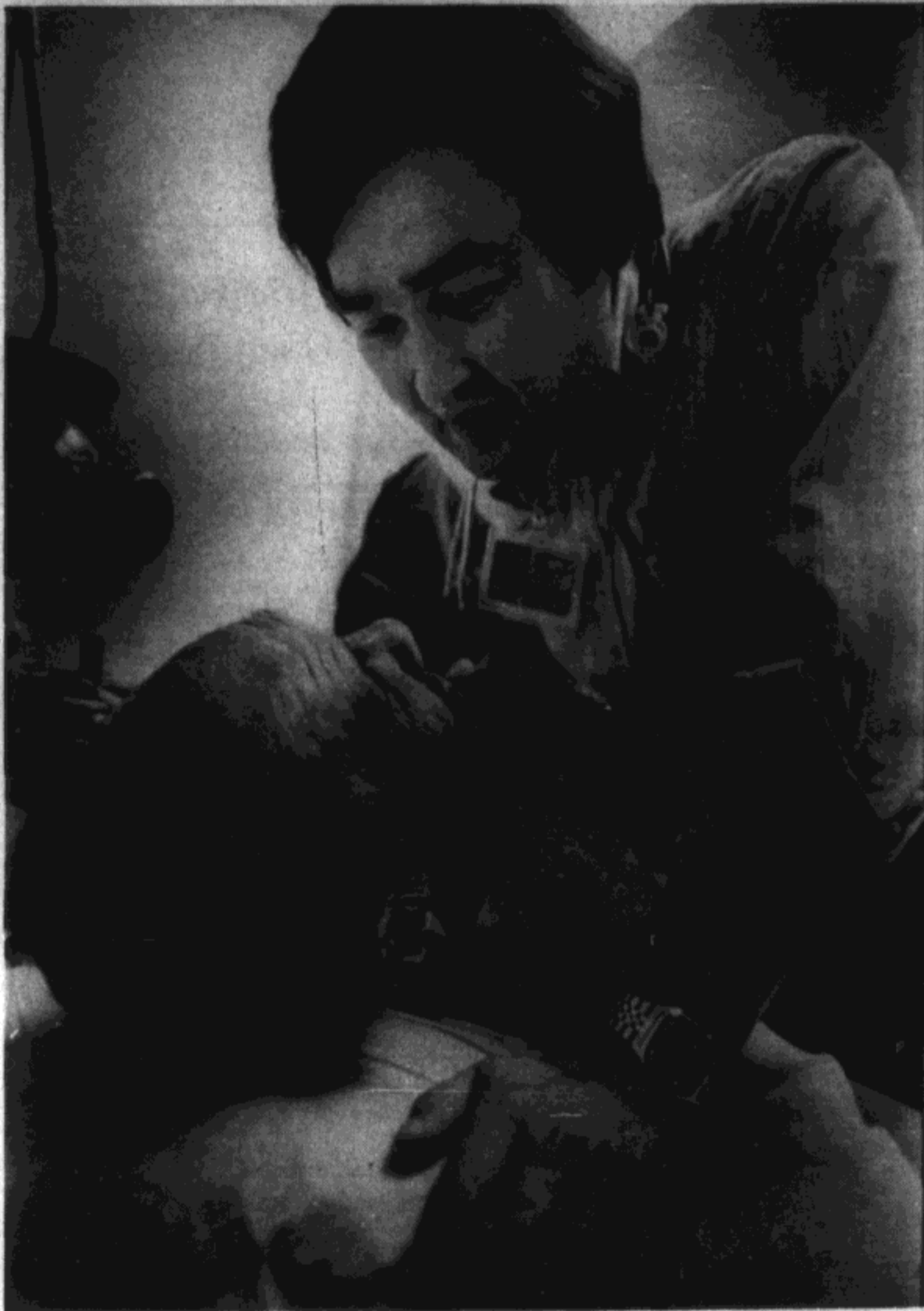
Dr. David Schraer, a physician at the medical center.

Ryan's interest in medicine was sparked by a lack of adequate medical care in rural Alaska — a shortage which hit him and his family hard. When Ryan was about seven years old, his 16-month-old baby brother died of a blood clot in the brain. "I remember the frustration," he says. "My parents couldn't get a doctor. The weather was bad, and my dad couldn't fly out."

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# Life's tragedies led to medical career



Caring and compassion are two of the qualities Ryan feels most important for a doctor to possess. Here, he helps an elderly man in his seventies.

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When he was eight, Ryan began urinating blood and was rushed to the hospital in Anchorage where he would stay for two and a half months. "I was frightened," he remembers. "I was also curious to know what was going on." Ryan found he had a kidney infection with a very long name: glomerulonephritis.

Fortunately, he received good treatment and left the hospital in good health. Not so fortunate was a friend he had in the eighth grade. She was driving a motorcycle while Ryan pedaled a regular bicycle nearby. "I was watching her," he remembers. "Holy cow! I said all of a sudden. 'That thing's out of control!'"

The motorcycle slammed into a four-by-four pole. Although her passenger was unharmed, Ryan's friend was critically injured and had to be flown to Nome. By the time she arrived, she had suffocated in her own blood.

Much later, her doctor from Nome expressed his frustration over the tragedy to Ryan. "If a doctor had been there, and if he could have had adequate support, she could have been saved," Ryan explains.

In 1976, Ryan's uncle was struck with leukemia. A year later, his father, Wilford Paul Ryan, Sr., died of a rare form of liver cancer. "He was healthy at Thanksgiving," Ryan relates. "He was a little weak at Christmas. He wasn't doing all of his regular stuff. He tired easily. By February, they diagnosed the cancer and he went into surgery. Two weeks later he was dead."

Few professions have educa-

tional requirements as demanding as those for medicine. Not only must a student do very well in college, but he must pass a demanding entrance exam, make his way through some soul-searching interviews, successfully complete four years of medical school and then complete an internship that in some cases lasts up to seven years.

"Both of my parents stressed education," Ryan says. "They stressed excellence. They encouraged their children to reach out and explore." Both of his parents were Alaska Natives, and both had acquired educations of their own. Ryan's mother, Eva, was a schoolteacher. His father ran a flying service which the family continues today.

The Ryans encouraged all nine of their children, of which Adrian was the fifth, to seek a college education. As the older children did so, they in turn encouraged the younger.

Ryan also credits his teachers and classmates at Covenant High School in Unalakleet with creating an atmosphere which made education seem challenging fun and exciting. He had thought he would go to school in Texas and become an airline pilot, airline mechanic or both, but this goal changed when Ryan was chosen at the age of 18 to represent Alaska at the National Youth Science Congress in Virginia.

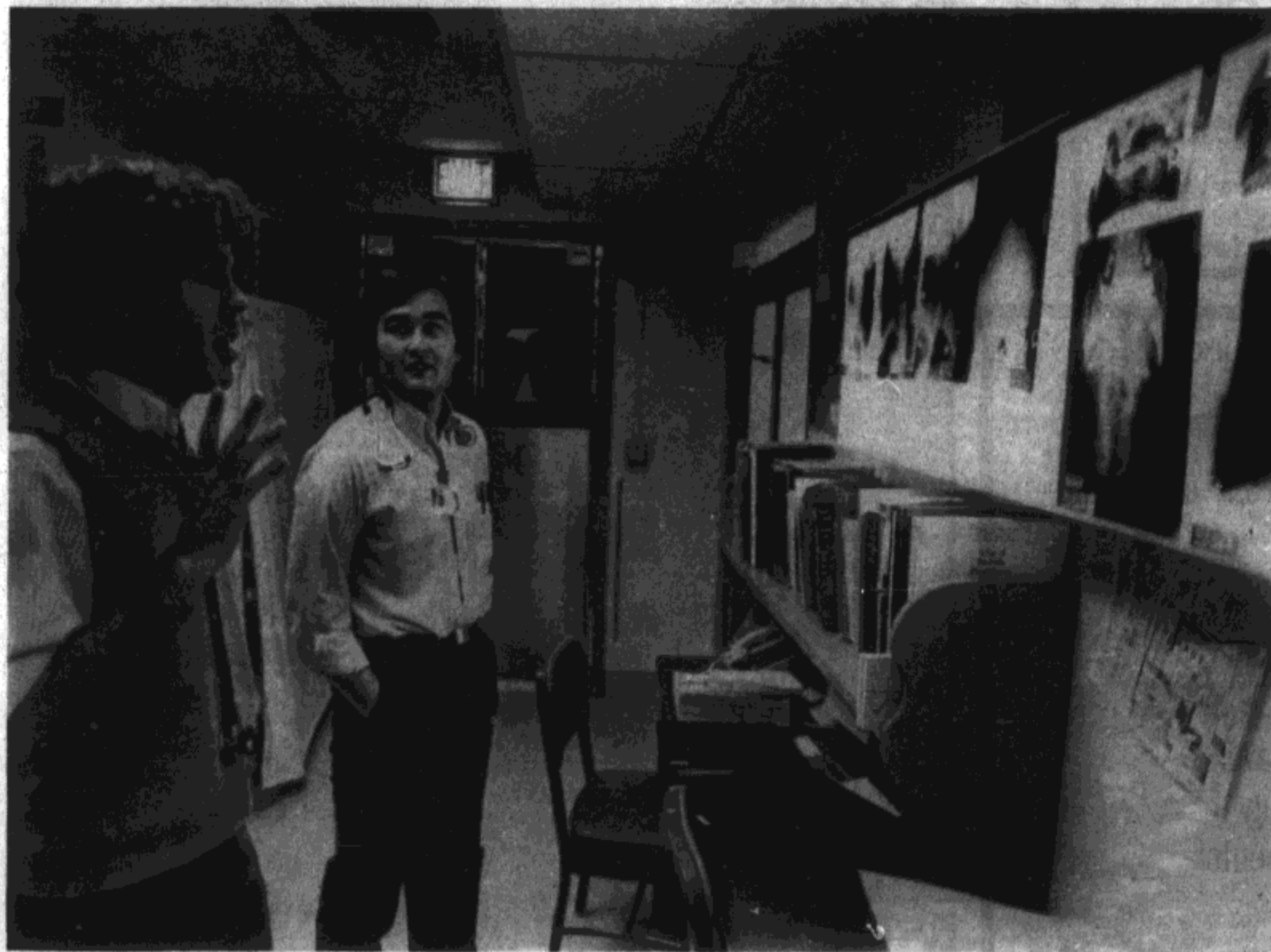
"I met some brilliant students from all over the country," he explains. "There were medical doctors there, and scientists from NASA, Caltec, and many of the big universities. It really sparked my interest in science. It was also the first time I had ever been out of Alaska."

Ryan then chose to major in chemistry at Washington, with minors in math and physics. When he was a sophomore, he met Amy Parker of Florence, OR., who is now his wife and is also the mother of his 22-month-old son Benjamin.

After graduating from college with a 3.5 grade point average, Ryan eventually took and passed his entrance exams and was accepted into the University of Washington Medical School under what is known as the WAMI-Washington, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho-program. Since there are no medical schools in Alaska, Montana and Idaho, each state is guaranteed a certain number of openings each year for medical students to attend the University of Washington.

Ryan was the first Native student ever to participate in WAMI, which assures Alaska 10 students annually.

After he graduates next June, Ryan plans to fill his three-year residency requirements in either Seattle, or Spokane, Washington; Grand Junction, Colorado; Orlando, Fla.; Boise, Ida.; Davis, Ca.; or Tucson, Arizona. After visiting alterna-



Dr. David Schraer, Ryan's supervisor, discusses X-rays taken of the truck victim and what they mean, with the young medical student.





Ryan examines a clean and partly sutured laceration (left) on the accident victim's forehead before continuing on with the suturing (above). At right, Ryan tests the now stitched-up patient by having him follow his finger his eyes.

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

tive sites, a student ranks the hospitals or medical centers in the order he prefers.

After the residency requirement is fulfilled, Ryan plans to return to Alaska, both to meet obligations owed to the state for help in financing his education, and because of his own desire to return.

"I can't say whether I would be working in a city such as Anchorage or Fairbanks, or in a more remote center such as Nome, Kotzebue, or even Unalakleet," Ryan says. "Only time will tell."

"My ultimate dream, whether it will ever come true I don't know, is to return to Bush Alaska in private family practice or in a small group practice, and to combine that with flying. I would also like to one day know that I had made a difference in the quality of people's lives."

Even while attending school, Ryan has kept up his flying. He has worked summertimes for his family's business, flying commercially in the Nome Unalakleet area. Along the way from childhood to doctor, Ryan has also worked as a 90- to 100-hour-a-week laborer in a fish processing plant, a commercial fisherman, a ground crewman, and a carpenter's apprentice.

Nowhere, however, did he have to work harder than in medical school itself, he says. In his third year, Ryan found along with his studies, he was on call different nights to work with doctors in surgery, obstetrics, emergency, psychiatry and pediatrics.

On days that he worked with the surgeons, Ryan would go for 36 hours straight. Hard as it was, Ryan says he found the opportunity to be involved with many different types of surgery to be interesting and rewarding.

"I really liked the opportunity to observe plastic surgery, and the suturing of lacerations. I had the opportunity to see so many different types of surgeries: gunshot wounds to the head, stab wounds to the chest and heart, multiple fractures, punk rockers whom the speakers had fallen on, and of course, alcoholics with lacerations and bruises."

As a doctor, Ryan can always count on having to work hard. Yet he does not expect to very often repeat the type of rigorous hours demanded in medical school, nor does he want to. "Nobody is superman," he explains. "There is a certain lifestyle which I plan to have."

"I intend to spend time with my family, with my family's business, with sports and church. I just can't see myself doing nothing but medical work."

Ryan stresses that he would be willing to get up at any hour of the night for a true emergency, but not for minor problems which could wait. He would also expect to be able to trust the judgment of whomever was on call to know what was minor and what was major.

Both Ryan and Amy, who is a nurse, are interested in what he describes as "social services" — working with people

in a way that touches them for the better. They are co-sponsors of a Cambodian family which has set out to build a new life for itself in the State of Washington after leaving their war-torn homeland.

They are active in the Covenant Church and take turns every other Sunday caring for the young preschoolers who attend.

"I enjoy making people happy," Ryan explains. "Even if it's just something like smiling, and saying 'hi' to a stranger. Just a smile can make life more enjoyable."

While back in Alaska, Ryan also has been visiting young Native students who are interested in medical careers, encouraging them to succeed in their ambitions.

It is good to have the support of family and friends, he tells them. Even if this is lacking, they can succeed, Ryan believes. "You have to

have self-motivation, and discipline. If you have pride, and respect for your identity and you set your goals and work to complete them, you can succeed."

"It can be very difficult, but it can be done."

Ryan believes that after setting the goal, a student must be careful not to psyche himself out. A high school student with a desire to be a doctor could be overcome with discouragement by contemplating 11 to more than 15 more years before he could be a full-fledged doctor.

The secret, says Ryan, is to take one step at a time. "Concentrate on finishing high school. Then college. Then your entrance exam, and your interviews. Then work hard in medical school. When you've done that, concentrate on your internship."

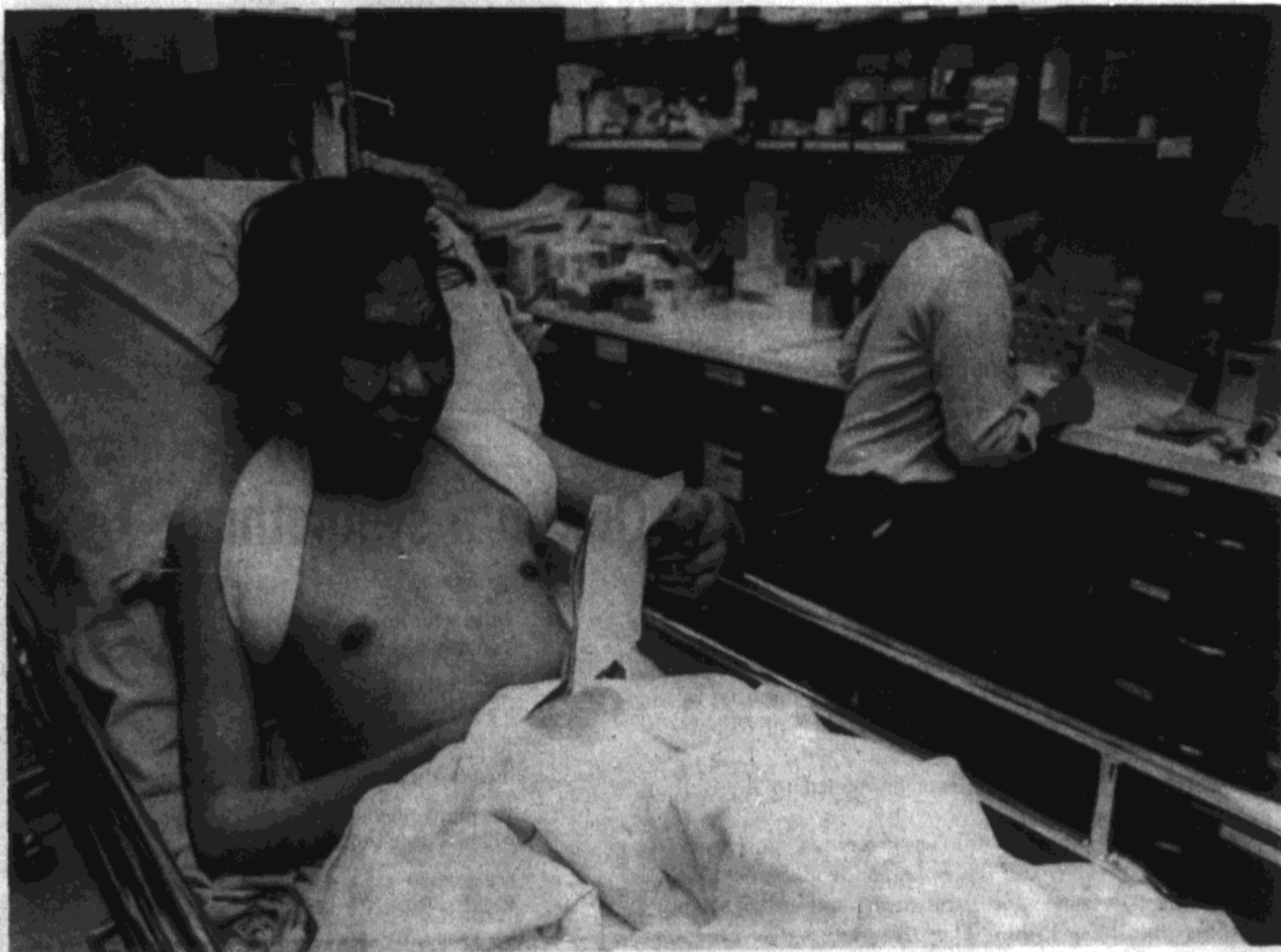
When Ryan visited some students at West High, their most intense questions were directed

toward death. When was a person dead? What was it like to work with the dead?

"Death is something I can't explain," says Ryan. "One moment, you can feel someone's presence, and then, something's gone, and there's just a body there."

A doctor must deal with death, and perhaps more painfully, with the emotions of grieving relatives. "It's important to be caring and compassionate," Ryan explains. "Having seen death in my family, I can truly say to someone 'I'm sorry, I have felt this way before.' I feel this will make me a better physician."

"In medicine, you deal with many different emotions. There is the jubilee of the newborn! Then there is sickness and death. You have to remember that this is all part of life. If you are prepared, you can do a lot of good for people."



With a bit of disbelief, the patient studies a ticket a policeman stuffed into his pocket as he lay helpless after being struck by the truck, which apparently then left the scene. Now, besides suffering a broken clavicle, the bone which holds his shoulder in place, and many stitches, the ticket tells him he must pay a \$10 fine for walking on the wrong side of the road. Ryan finishes up medical paperwork.