Faculty Snapshots

Does the web play a big role in keeping Allegheny County residents healthy? "Reports of the information technology revolution are greatly exaggerated. It doesn't mean it's not going to happen. It hasn't happened here yet," says Charles Friedman. The professor of medicine and director of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine's Center for Biomedical Informatics served in an advisory capacity on a study of how county residents use the web for health care. Some findings of the effort undertaken by Pitt, the National Library of Medicine, and the Jewish Healthcare Foundation: 50 percent of county residents relied only on their doctors for health information; 25 percent sought information to supplement what they received from their doctors, most often from the Internet, books, and magazines. Fewer than 3 percent reported that their doctors have referred them to web sites.

In the United States, one in 75 people contracts melanoma, and 7,800 die from the disease each year. In the May 1 issue of the Journal of Clinical Oncology, John Kirkwood, professor of medicine, reported that patients with advanced melanoma who were treated with interferon alfa-2b following surgery had a relapse rate 33 percent lower than those treated with the GMK anti-melanoma vaccine following surgery. In addition, those who received the interferon treatment had a 33 percent lower death rate than those treated with the vaccine. Kirkwood's earlier research led the Food and Drug Administration, in 1995, to approve interferon alfa-2b as the first adjuvant therapy for high-risk melanoma.

In April, colleagues honored the life and career of Thomas Starzl, distinguished service professor of the health sciences. Scientists from around the world presented papers for a Festschrift and celebrated the man who performed the world's first successful liver transplant in humans in 1967 and has been making transplantation breakthroughs ever since. "The biggest limitation now is the shortage of organs," says Starzl. His current research focuses on how to make animal organs work in humans. "What we're trying to do is insert human genes into pigs and then to clone the pigs. We're working with the people who cloned Dolly. . . . If you can clone, you can produce a lot of pig donors." —DH
Becker: Expect the Unexpected

“You have to keep an open mind, to be ready for the unexpected.”
Dorothy J. Becker (Fel ‘76) will tell you that is the mark of a good clinical researcher.

Becker, who won the Medical Alumni Association’s 2001 McEllroy Award, which recognizes outstanding physicians who did their training here, is more than willing to be surprised.

The director of the division of endocrinology and of the diabetes section at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh arrived from her native South Africa in 1974 for a two-year endocrinology fellowship at Children’s. Initially interested in nutrition and hormones, Becker has contributed to the medical community’s understanding of complications associated with diabetes in childhood; she’s also pursuing ways to predict the onset of the disease in those at risk. And recently, she was the coauthor of a study on the relationship between diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

It has been 25 years since Becker completed that endocrinology fellowship. What has kept her in Pittsburgh is the chance to collaborate with physicians here. “The big thing is that those relationships,” she says, “have made our research great for two decades.” —JL

THE 52-MILE, 800-ARTICLE MAN

On Wednesdays at 4:30 a.m., Ernest Moore, MD ’72, sets out into the cool morning darkness with running partners from his lab. It’s part of the professor of surgery at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center’s spring training for his annual 52-mile ultramarathon. During the four-hour run, the topic of conversation is likely to turn to research pursuits, making it a doubly productive time for Moore, who has published nearly 800 articles throughout the past 25 years.

This May, the prolific Moore won the Hench Distinguished Alumnus Award given by the Medical Alumni Association.

David Feliciano, professor of surgery at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, notes that Moore is the author of one of the most significant articles ever written on hepatic injuries in modern trauma. That review article, published in the American Journal of Surgery in 1984, helped pave the way for a major shift in how surgeons treat liver trauma—from intervening operatively in almost all cases to a much more hands-off approach.

Other studies by Moore helped change the way surgeons treat trauma to the spleen and blunt rupture of the descending thoracic aorta. He is now investigating how intercellular signaling can lead to multiple-organ failure (one of the most common reasons that patients die in the intensive care unit after trauma). —DH

FLASHBACK

“[It was] Thomas Parran who led the nation after World War I to develop a strategy for controlling venereal diseases. He was courageous, and if you think that it’s difficult for the surgeon general today to talk about sex, Thomas Parran was not even allowed to say the word ‘syphilis’ on the radio. . . .

When he left the Office of the Surgeon General in 1948, [Parran] came here to the University of Pittsburgh to be the first dean of the Graduate School of Public Health.”

—Surgeon General David Satcher, speaking at the University’s 2001 Commencement
Appointments

As the new chair of the Department of Pediatrics, David Perlmutter plans to emphasize fellowship training. He notes: “To train the next generation of academic pediatricians, we need to recruit physician-scientists who can be mentors.”

The pediatrician’s own research into alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency, which can cause liver disease in children and emphysema in adults, has lent insight into a cellular process implicated in many diseases. “There is a mechanism in every cell whereby the cell can recognize when a protein is not folding correctly and dispose of it,” says Perlmutter. He refers to this as the quality control mechanism of the cell; his lab has offered some important information on how that mechanism works.

The new director of the Office of Technology Management, Christopher Capelli, plans to further educate Pitt faculty and staff about how technology is turned into a commercial product—and the role they can play in that process. “Technology doesn’t sell itself,” says Capelli. “The people who know the most about the technology—the scientists, the faculty—are the ones who sell it.” Capelli has a BS in engineering and an MD. He holds eight US patents.

Bernard Goldstein, former director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute, in New Jersey, will join the Department of Medicine. Most of his time, however, will be spent down the street; he is now dean of Pitt’s Graduate School of Public Health. He comes to Pittsburgh from New Jersey by way of Malaysia. Global issues in environmental medicine are among his most recent fascinations, as is the interface between science and public policy. Goldstein’s talents are well known in public health sectors: He was the Environmental Protection Agency’s assistant administrator for research and development and chaired the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) Role of the Physician in Occupational and Environmental Medicine effort and the National Institutes of Health’s Toxicology Study Section. He is a member of the IOM.

—DH & EL

OF NOTE

Appointments

BUMPER TO BUMPER

Sometimes there’s nothing like a good automotive metaphor. At a May meeting of 100-plus professors and students, the call for a “tune-up” of the curriculum elicited discussion as well as nods of support. To ensure that Pitt med graduates are among the best prepared in the world, the school holds this novel Curriculum Colloquium each year. Leaning across tables, attendees passed microphones to one another, considering the triumphs and trials of problem-based learning, the need to deepen the scope of genetics study, a proposal to increase scholarly research opportunities, among other issues. While participants noted that Pitt’s curriculum is hailed as model, there was also a growing recognition that it was time to make changes to stay ahead of the pack.

Perlmutter

Lazarus department store employees painted 55 butterfly mobiles that will hang in oncology patient rooms at UPMC Presbyterian and Shadyside.

Goldstein

PITTMED

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Gangrene is creeping up Ben Kamanja’s left leg. He needs an amputation below the knee.

Kamanja arrived at the Central Government Hospital in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, three weeks ago. The surgeon cannot amputate his leg until Kamanja has found someone to donate the blood needed for the operation. Every day that Kamanja’s operation is postponed, the gangrene spreads. When the doctor visits, he asks Kamanja, “Have you found blood yet?” Kamanja must find his own donor, because in Malawi, the blood banks are empty.

Malawians no longer give to the blood banks, because if they did, their blood would be tested. If they were tested, they might find out they were HIV positive.

Mitsu Anderson, who graduated in May from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, met Kamanja during his four-week clerkship in Malawi this spring. Kamanja likely developed gangrene from a minor wound that never received medical attention. The disease spread from his foot to his leg in the weeks he waited before coming to the hospital. Such delays in treatment are commonplace in a country where there is only a handful of doctors.

“The low physician-to-population ratio has concrete manifestations: Patients present very late in their disease,” says Anderson. He recalls a boy whose bone cancer disfigured his face and a man whose infected head wound became a pus-filled protrusion the size of a strawberry.

“The diseases you see there are so glaringly obvious,” he says.

With Kim Dovin, Susan Rubin, and Lauren Weintraub—other Class of 2001 students who were in Lilongwe—Anderson discovered what it was like to try to care for patients with few effective treatments available. Twice, he declared children dead after their hearts failed because of malaria-induced anemia. A blood transfusion probably would have saved them—but again, there was no ready source. He saw many with AIDS; they received Panadol, an aspirin equivalent, and antibiotics and antifungal agents to fight associated infections. Because of limited resources, Anderson heard patients being told again and again, “I’m sorry, there’s nothing we can do for you.” “Seeing so much death and destruction in the hospital setting can be emotionally traumatizing,” says Anderson. “It was very hard.”

The health care professionals he worked alongside amazed him. He assisted a surgeon whose repertoire of procedures was extensive: “On any given day, I would assist him on, say, a very difficult pediatric GI surgery, a neurology surgery, an adult breast cancer surgery. It was mind-boggling, everything he could do.” US surgeons are likely to focus on a particular body region or organ system.

Five students have already signed up for the Malawi clerkship next year. The program has gotten off the ground with the help of Thuy Bui, who directs the health care to underserved populations office.

Anderson, now in a family practice residency in Florida, says he’ll be looking for more opportunities to work overseas.

FOOTNOTE
Twenty-two percent of the Class of 2001—31 students—did clerkships abroad during the past academic year. They served in South America, Africa, Europe, Australia, and Asia.