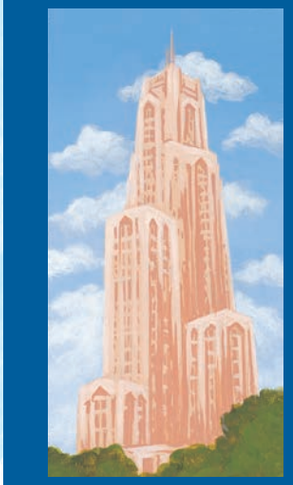

CLASS NOTES

'60s

After a rewarding tenure as a kidney transplant surgeon, **Nicholas Feduska** (MD '67) has been pursuing a career in residential real estate. As "the one who takes house calls but doesn't make house calls," Feduska treats his clients "as precisely," he says, "as I used to treat a patient." Feduska's alumni legacy lives on at Falk Library: In 1963, when Falk used to close at 7:30 p.m., Feduska—who "lived" in the library—circulated petitions to extend Falk's hours first to 10 p.m. and later to midnight, where they remain today, five nights a week. Why the change? "So many students were hungry for knowledge," he says.

'80s

Jennifer Campbell (MD '80) serves as councilmember for San Diego's District 2. She's the city's "Doctor on Call to Fix City Hall," shaping codes, laws, and national resolutions on behalf of her constituents. Campbell practiced and taught integrative medicine before joining public office—after "37 years in medicine, I felt this calling," she says. She decided to run in 2018 against an incumbent for her seat; she won with a 16 percent margin. "No physician had ever been on the city council," she says. "I bring a whole new way of looking at things as a differential diagnostician."

Campbell

Ismene Petrakis (MD '87) is a professor of psychiatry at Yale University, where she directs their addiction psychiatry residency; she is also the chief of Mental Health at Veterans Affairs Connecticut Healthcare System. Petrakis's research focuses on the opioid epidemic. As coprincipal investigator on a new VA Cooperative Study, she'll be researching the effectiveness of two formulations of buprenorphine in treating opioid addiction among veterans. The $40 million study—which "plans to recruit 900 subjects over 20 sites," says Petrakis—aims to increase treatment retention and prevent relapse in those struggling to recover from opioid disorder.

According to **Neal Kohatsu** (MD '82), "We need to think of health in the context of both one-on-one care and care of populations." He's a consultant in population health and preventive medicine and a volunteer clinical faculty member in the University of California, Davis Department of Family and Community Medicine. He recently directed a major smoking-cessation research program for Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program, and helped to implement a quality strategy for the California Department of Health Care Services.

'90s

On July 1, **Aviva Abosch** (Neurobiology PhD '91, MD '93) became the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Nancy A. Keegan and Donald R. Voelte Jr. Chair in Neurosurgery. There have not been many women chairs of American neurosurgery departments. "I was fascinated as an undergrad," says Abosch, "by issues of consciousness—what distinguishes us from other parts of the animal kingdom? What's different about our brains?" Her current research on neuromodulation—a treatment she often uses for patients with epilepsy, movement disorders, and severe obsessive-compulsive disorder—contributes an ever-evolving response to this question.

'00s

Benedict Nwomeh (Pediatric Surgery Fellow '03) is a professor of surgery and pediatrics at Ohio State University (OSU) and vice chair of the pediatric surgery fellowship at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "The most important part of my work is figuring out what illness prevents a child from achieving their full potential and using my surgical skills to fix the problem," he says. Nwomeh directs OSU's pediatric surgery fellowship. He also helps train doctors to increase surgical capacity in sub-Saharan Africa: "As a native African," says Nwomeh, "a major passion of mine is giving back to the continent of my birth."

Nwomeh

Michael Gimbel (General Surgery Resident '03) is an assistant professor of plastic surgery at Pitt. His clinical practice focuses on reconstructive surgery, often for post-treatment cancer patients, "reconstructing many of the otherwise devastating defects that result from cancer removal," he says. This July, he transitioned his practice solely to UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital, where he serves as chief of plastic surgery and educates medical trainees.

"I find teaching surgery to be hard, much harder than surgery itself," says Gimbel. "But it is extremely gratifying." He was recognized with the Plastic Surgery Teacher of the Year Award in 2013.

'10s

Mari Mori (Biomedical Informatics MS '12) is an assistant professor of pediatrics at Ohio State University and a clinical and biochemical geneticist at Nationwide Children's Hospital—roles begun this year that mark "a big change in my career," she says. The MD treats both adults and children for inborn errors of metabolism, a grouping of rare genetic disorders in which a patient cannot convert food into energy. For her ongoing research on Pompe disease, the Pfizer/AGCM Foundation awarded Mori its Clinical Genetics Combined Residency for Translational Genomic Scholars Fellowship Award in 2015.

In July, **Jocelyn Fitzgerald** (MD '13) begins her final year of fellowship in urogynecology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. "I feel so strongly," she says, "about the ever-changing nature of women's bodies, and understanding their health care journey throughout the life span." The Physician Scientist Training Program alumna is also committed to outreach, serving as a member of the social media committees for the American Urogynecologic Society, *Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Surgery*, and the Society of Gynecologic Surgeons. Last year, she also traveled to Rwanda to treat women suffering from obstetric fistulas and to train local surgeons and physicians on obstetric care and treatment. *—Rachel Mennies*

WE KNEW YOU WHEN

DONALD MERCER

Mercer

Donald Mercer (PhD '68) wasn't expecting a press conference. But when his boss told him to put on his best lab coat, he did so, joining representatives from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Montefiore Hospital in front of the cameras.

The year was 1975, and the occasion was the announcement of Mercer's breakthrough cardiac research describing a quantitative blood test called CK-MB (cardiac isoenzyme of creatine kinase), which was capable of detecting heart attacks with nearly perfect accuracy.

Mercer's blood test saved patients from unnecessary treatment and eliminated false positives from ailments such as indigestion.

And it all came about because Mercer, then an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Pathology, had lunch with a colleague, chief cardiologist Murray Varat.

"We were talking about the Steelers or something. And the conversation turned to his frustration about these inaccurate tests. I thought if we could do something about these tests, we could not only save the hospital a considerable amount of money, but save many lives by placing the patients in the correct rooms to receive the appropriate treatment," says Mercer.

Nearly 45 years later, Mercer's test remains the benchmark for heart attack tests.

His paper on the test was featured as one of the top 40 of the 20th century in the 2006 volume of *Landmark Papers in Clinical Chemistry*.

After retiring from Pitt Med, Mercer in 1999 returned to his hometown of Wheeling, W. Va., where he was recently inducted into the city's Hall of Fame.

He dates his love of chemistry to working in the lab of a favorite professor at Wheeling Jesuit University, who steered him toward Pitt Med.

"Working in the chemistry lab my junior and senior years helped me focus on a career in chemistry," Mercer says. "I felt maybe I could take my chemistry skills and do something with them.

"And I did." *—Adam Reger*

MAX LEAKE

Second-year medical students learn how to intubate a mannequin "patient" under the guidance of William McIvor (Res '94), WISER's associate director for medical student programs.

OLDER WISER

The Peter M. Winter Institute for Simulation, Education, and Research (WISER) is 25 years old and in its prime. A leading simulation center, WISER has grown from a medical-student training hub into an educational powerhouse for providers at all levels of experience, specialty, and discipline. WISER's resources, says its director, Paul Phrampus (Res '00), "allow people to immerse in whatever they're learning." Students, he notes, "can practice over and over, applying their knowledge in a safe environment" before working with actual patients.

WISER's founding director, anesthesiologist John Schaefer, recognized the need for simulation-based education in 1994 and reached out to Pitt Med's legendary Peter Safar in the hopes of building the center. Their passion—coupled with a generous financial commitment from Peter Winter, chair of Pitt's Department of Anesthesiology at the time and the center's namesake—ultimately made WISER possible. Says Phrampus of Winter's commitment, "He put his neck on the line." *—RM*

PETER F. FERSON

AUG. 30, 1948–JUNE 30, 2019


Ferson

When the news broke that Peter Ferson (MD '73, Res '79) died this June, his former student Marcus Hoffman took to Twitter, calling for fellow alums to share #DrFersonMemories. "Everyone I knew had a Dr. Ferson story," Hoffman says. "He hammered home basics of surgery and operative approaches in a way that became enlightening."

Ferson, a cardiothoracic surgeon, professor emeritus of surgery, and the Charles Gray Watson Professor of Surgical Education, remained at Pitt for his entire career, educating more than four decades' worth of medical students and surgical trainees while primarily treating lung and esophageal cancer patients as a surgeon.

After Hoffman's initial invitation, #DrFersonMemories grew, filling Twitter with anecdotes both humorous and somber—a balance, according to many who contributed, that often characterized Ferson himself. "Things Dr. Ferson taught me:" wrote Temple Ratcliffe (MD '03)—"How to write admit orders. Simultaneous handshake/pulse check. … Most importantly: what loving your patients, learners, & profession looks like."

"[A]ll of us who were heavily influenced by him," says Hoffman, "can essentially hear him in our minds from time to time."

—Rachel Mennies

CHARLES FITZ

MAY 6, 1937—FEB. 22, 2019


Fitz

Charles Fitz, or "Chuck," was a father of pediatric neuroradiology, as well as "a terrific colleague," remembers Geoffrey Kurland, Pitt professor of pediatrics and the medical director for the pediatric lung transplantation program. "He carried a gruff exterior, beneath which beat a gentle heart."

Fitz was a professor of radiology at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as a practicing interventional radiologist and onetime UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh radiologist-in-chief. His colleagues recall him treating every trainee interaction as a "teachable moment."

Kurland fondly recalls how "[Fitz's] interaction was designed to teach residents to think more about each clinical situation, and to better formulate their questions in the first place," which often meant an easy answer to a student's question wasn't forthcoming. However, notes Kurland, "almost invariably, the resident would personally learn how great a teacher and colleague Chuck was."

Fitz's wife, Anna, also recalls his lifelong commitment to inquiry. "He wouldn't stop working until the day his colleagues would stop asking him questions," she says.

During his first faculty appointment at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto in 1976, he coauthored—alongside fellow faculty member Derek Harwood-Nash—the three-volume textbook *Neuroradiology in Infants and Children*. The textbook is one of the first for pediatric neuroradiology. Before his time in Toronto, he served as a physician in the air force.

"Many of us hope to leave behind a legacy: students we taught, papers we wrote, talks we gave, friends we made," says Kurland. "Chuck most certainly did all of that and then some."

—RM

Donations may be made to Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Foundation, Radiology Research Fund. For information: Rachel McCune, rachel.mccune@chp.edu.

JAMES R. ZUBERBUHLER

AUG. 7, 1929–JUNE 24, 2019


Zuberbuhler

"Dr. Zube," as he was called, brought warmth and irreverent humor to the University of Pittsburgh for more than 40 years. Though he trained as an adult cardiologist, his passion for children drew him to pediatric cardiology "in an era," says his longtime colleague and friend Lee Beerman (MD '74), "when it was not even a specialty in its own right." Zuberbuhler "helped make pediatric cardiology and the care of children and adults with congenital heart disease what it is today," adds Beerman. He notes that Zuberbuhler had "boundless curiosity and passion for delivering the highest quality of care to his patients and families."

The former air force captain served as both a Pitt Med educator and, for nearly 30 years, director of pediatric cardiology at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. He "raised the use of the stethoscope, cardiac physical exam, and bedside approach to an art form," recalls Beerman. He authored more than 100 publications, including the 1981 *Clinical Diagnosis in Pediatric Cardiology*, still used today. When Zuberbuhler retired from his position as chief in 1994, Children's established the annual James R. Zuberbuhler Lecture.

In retirement, he built a collection of 900 photographs of wildflowers indigenous to Western Pennsylvania. For his online gallery, the ever-curious Zuberbuhler posted that he, of course, welcomed "comments and constructive criticism."

—RM

IN MEMORIAM

'50s

WILLIAM J. GARNER
MD '51
JULY 9, 2019

JOHN C. WAIN
MD '52
JULY 31, 2019

JOHN H. MOORE
MD '53
MAY 13, 2019

EUGENE W. DELSERONE
MD '56
JULY 8, 2019

JOHN ROBERT (BOB) DILLE
MD '56
MAY 5, 2019

CHARLES E. KOVAR
MD '56
JULY 22, 2019

'60s

GEORGE F. BUERGER JR.
RES '63, '68
JUNE 16, 2019

WILLIAM C. SCHMIDT
MD '63
SEPT. 6, 2018

JEROLD H. ALTMAN
RES '66
JULY 22, 2019

CHARLES S. STONE
RES '67
JULY 15, 2019

ROBERT KISILEVSKY
PHD '69
JUNE 5, 2019

'70s

TRUMAN E. MAST
RES '74, '76
MAY 17, 2019

NANCY K. ALBERTS
MD '79
MAY 11, 2019

FACULTY

JAMES A. GRAVES
RES '08
MARCH 14, 2019

DEFEAT INFECTION!

ROBERT J. O'CONNELL

BY CARA MASSET

PUWANAI SANGSRI/ARMED FORCES RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: ELENA GIALAMAS CERRI

Tracking infectious disease up close.

At a research clinic in Thailand, study participants became familiar faces during twice-weekly visits for blood draws. The volunteers had self-identified as being at high-risk for HIV infection, but they hadn't tested positive. During the course of the study, some participants became infected with the virus. The frequent blood tests indicated that they were in the throes of acute HIV infections, yet they otherwise appeared to be in good health. No symptoms to speak of.

The scientists, including Colonel Robert J. O'Connell (MD '97), were surprised. Previously, it was thought that people experiencing an acute HIV infection would present with clear symptoms. The team published its Thai clinic results, as well as results from clinics in East Africa, in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2016. "It was the very first time that [we] had the ability to so very carefully characterize what the virus was doing in the very beginning of human infection," O'Connell says of the study.

Inventing an HIV vaccine—and even a cure—was a primary assignment for Colonel O'Connell in his former role as director of the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences (AFRIMS). The institute in Bangkok began when American and Thai armies worked together to stop a cholera epidemic in the 1950s. The partnership has grown into finding cures for infectious diseases that are of particular concern to soldiers. "When we do that and are successful, we generate products or knowledge that have broader public health benefits," he says.

As he served in this role, the military and civilian scientists in his circle studied not only HIV, but also malaria, dengue, and other tropical infections. He regularly travelled throughout Asia to oversee research projects in Nepal, Cambodia, and the Philippines and to speak at expert exchanges with military health services in such locations as China, Myanmar, Singapore, and Malaysia.

In July, O'Connell moved on to a new assignment: deputy commander of the parent organization of AFRIMS, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Silver Spring, Md. "We conduct infectious disease and brain health research," he says. His new e-mail signature reflects the broader impact of his work: "Soldier Health. World Health."

O'Connell, born and raised a Minnesotan, earned his Pitt MD with assistance from the military's Health Professions Scholarship Program, then trained in infectious diseases and internal medicine with the U.S. Air Force Medical Corps in Texas. His research career began at Walter Reed. He became chief of the Department of Retrovirology at AFRIMS in 2013.

Today, AFRIMS has a partnership with Pitt, O'Connell notes with pride. The institute is working with John Mellors, who holds Pitt's Chair for Global Elimination of HIV and AIDS, to investigate an immunotherapy treatment for HIV that involves removing a patient's cells, priming them for a fight, and returning them to the patient's body.

When O'Connell reflects on his Pitt days, he says that on a practical level, he is most grateful for the medical training that guided him as a battalion surgeon during a one-year deployment to Iraq beginning in 2009. He's also thankful that he attended a university with legends who continue to inspire his work.

O'Connell remembers listening to talks by Jonas Salk as a visiting lecturer and Bernard Fisher on his first day of med school. "Jonas Salk pursued a product—[the polio vaccine]—that tangibly made an enormous impact on the world," he says. "On the other hand, Bernard Fisher made an enormous difference in the lives of countless women [by conducting clinical trials on breast cancer treatments]. He used evidence-based medicine to change the world."

O'Connell hopes to do both—develop products and gather evidence for the best ways to defeat infection. ■

WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Drop us a line at medmag@pitt.edu and tell us what you've been up to: career advancements, honors you've received, appointments, volunteer work, or publications. And if you have Pitt Med memories to share, we're all ears.