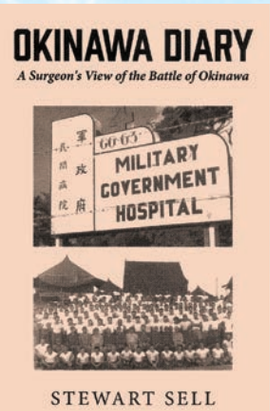
CLASS NOTES

'60s

On June 27, 1945, surgeon and Commander **Oliver Sell** (MD '26) wrote from Okinawa, "I was wondering, as I lay awake last night, if such things as clean people, lighted houses, motion pictures, beds, laughter, etc. still exist in this world." This was just a few days after his unit was ordered to build a field hospital (for locals and U.S. soldiers) behind enemy lines and in a hurry, during the Marines occupation. "Friday morning, June 22nd, we didn't have a tent pole on the area. At 800 hours, we reached the site assigned to us and started setting up. At 1530, the first truckload of patients started to arrive. By the evening we had 500 patients in all stages of disease, injury and starvation. You can't imagine their condition."



STEWART SELL

In 2019, Oliver Sell's son, **Stewart Sell** (MD '60), self-published his father's WWII diary and letters home, "Okinawa Diary: A Surgeon's View of the Battle of Okinawa," documenting life behind enemy lines, including kamikaze attacks, brain surgery without anesthesia and two typhoons. Oliver returned to his alma mater after the war and served as a Pitt surgery professor from 1945 to 1955. Stewart would graduate from Pitt Med a few years later and go on to uncover surprising discoveries with stem cells. In 2007, one of his papers was cited as a Scientific Landmark in Cancer Research by the American Association for Cancer Research.

Stewart is retiring this year from his role as professor of biomedical sciences at the University at Albany and moving to Williamsburg, Va.

'80s

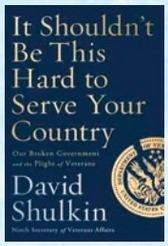
When the Department of Justice reached out to **Steven Zimmet** (Family Medicine Resident '81) to review a Medicare fraud case, Zimmet agreed. Three years later, in 2019, he testified as an expert witness, an experience he calls "a privilege." Zimmet—the owner and director of Zimmet Vein & Dermatology in Austin, Texas—worked with the DoJ for nearly 300 hours on the case, for which the defendant was found guilty. "While the vast majority of physicians are dedicated and caring," he says, "we also know there is significant fraud and abuse going on. It doesn't serve us, our field or society well."


Zimmet

William Sikov (Internal Medicine Resident '85)—or, as Alex Trebek calls him, Doctor Bill—is an associate professor of medicine, obstetrics and gynecology at Brown University. Last October, he appeared on "Jeopardy!"—coming in second place to win $2,000. Sikov is a breast medical oncologist and serves as the associate director of clinical research in the Program in Women's Oncology at the Women and Infants Hospital of Rhode Island. He researches neoadjuvant therapy for breast cancer and the treatment of triple-negative breast cancer.

The ninth secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs **David Shulkin** (Internal Medicine Resident '89, Internal Medicine Fellow '90) was the only member of President Trump's cabinet confirmed 100-0 by the Senate. He was also the highest-ranking official to have served under both Presidents Trump and Obama. His new book, "It Shouldn't Be This Hard to Serve Your Country: Our Broken Government and the Plight of Veterans," was published in October. Shulkin is the Distinguished Health Policy Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics and president of Shulkin Solutions, which partners with health care and veterans organizations. "Veterans deserve the best care available in this country," he notes.


Shulkin




Trebek with Sikov

'90s

Lawrence Wolf (MD '95) of Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, NY, is making changes as the internal medicine residency program director. He says residents needed "more formalized training" in skills like delivering bad news and speaking with empathy. So he helped to create the Humanism Project, which teaches residents communication skills, biomedical ethics and self-care—"the forgotten part of medical education," he says. Wolf hasn't forgotten the funny bone, either: He's exploring the benefits of using humor to teach medical students and residents. His team presented a workshop on the topic at the 2019 Southern Group on Educational Affairs regional conference.


Wolf

Captain **Dennis Faix** (MD '96) is the executive officer at the Naval Medical Research Unit Dayton at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. His two decades of service as a U.S. Navy preventive medicine officer, focusing on the treatment and prevention of service-related infectious diseases, has included tours in Japan, Denmark, Cambodia and Iraq—granting him "great professional satisfaction." He's also served in Europe with the WHO. From 2014–2017, Faix was the principal investigator of the Millennium Cohort Study, the largest-ever prospective cohort study of military personnel, with more than 200,000 participants; it examines "the health effects," says Faix, "of military-unique exposures such as deployment and combat."


Faix

'00s

Ann Cohen (PhD '06) is associate professor of psychiatry at Pitt and the associate director of the Neuroimaging Core for Pitt's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. She oversees a team of researchers investigating Alzheimer's disease, Down syndrome (DS) and the relationship between the two, among other areas. "Individuals with DS," Cohen notes, "almost universally have Alzheimer's pathology by


Cohen

midlife." Her recently published research indicates that the brain areas where people with DS first develop Alzheimer's pathology are different than those in neurotypical brains—a discovery, she says, that "will be very meaningful for clinical trials" working to prevent Alzheimer's in DS patients.


Baca

Justin Baca (PhD '07, MD '09), associate professor of emergency medicine at the University of New Mexico, says Pitt Med got him interested in developing tests that serve patients anywhere. Baca's lab uses a 3D printer to create wearable patches. Those patches have tiny needles for collecting fluid from between cells and could help diagnose and treat high blood pressure and infections. Baca is part of an international project using AI and machine learning to improve point-of-care testing in developing areas for cancer and Zika virus, as well as other conditions. He says their next question is: "How do we integrate the big data?"


Duvvuri

Umamaheswar Duvvuri (Otolaryngology Resident '07) serves as associate professor of otolaryngology at Pitt; he's also the Department of Otolaryngology's director of robotic surgery and holds an additional appointment at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. His department performs about 100 robot-assisted ear, nose and throat surgeries per year. As the medical director for Pittsburgh CREATES, Duvvuri helps connect surgeons with engineers and companies to further bioengineering innovation.


White

'10s

Patrick White (Hospice and Palliative Care Fellow '12) holds the Stokes Family Endowed Chair in Palliative Medicine and Supportive Care and is chief of palliative medicine at Washington University in St. Louis. He's also chief medical officer for BJC Home Care. In these roles, White helps to train future palliative care doctors. "I fell in love with the field," he says, "doing house calls with my father, who was a community pulmonologist. I was always in awe of how gracious the patients and families were."

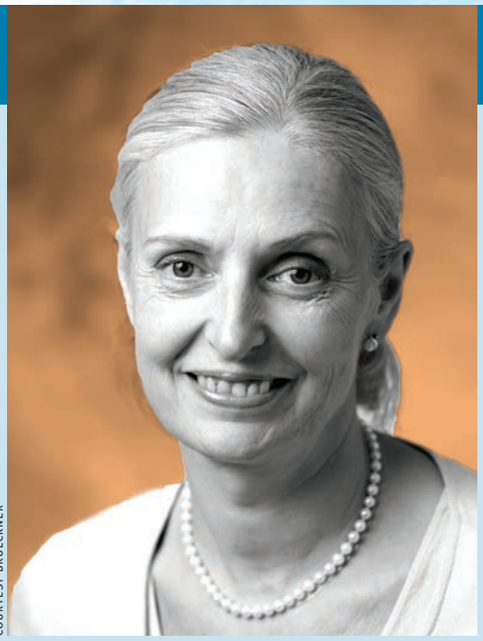

Sabins

Nina Sabins (PhD '13) was recently promoted to associate director at Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson, where she works to develop novel strategies to measure biomarkers—strategies that can lead to earlier, faster decision-making in the clinical environment. Her research publications, three of which she published while at Janssen, also focus on cancer immunology and immunotherapy—"proof," she says, with a chuckle, "that you can publish in industry." Why translational science? The field, Sabins notes, "is at the interface between the bench and the clinic," giving Sabins the opportunity, ultimately, to help create "better drugs for patients."

—Rachel Mennies and Alyce Palko

BRUECKNER

WHEN GENES OVERLAP


COURTESY BRUECKNER

Brueckner's lab is devoted to fixing congenital heart disease.

When Martina Brueckner (Res '87) established her Yale University laboratory in 1990 to study congenital heart disease (CHD), only 67% of CHD patients lived past their first year. Today, she says, 90% of patients survive into adulthood, but many of them struggle with "major challenges" that aren't properly diagnosed or understood. "Some CHD kids," she notes, "fall under the radar screen for whatever else is going on with them, because everything that's bothering them is blamed on their CHD."

Brueckner, professor of pediatric cardiology and genetics at Yale, is using large-scale genome sequencing to parse out the genetic underpinnings of CHD—work that has yielded insights into the disease's related challenges, too. Brueckner is a primary investigator with the national Pediatric Cardiac Genomics Consortium. In 2017, the group reported in Nature Genetics that a number of genes overlap between patients with CHD and those with autism. (The autism data was collected by the Simon Foundation.) When Brueckner and her colleagues compared the data sets, the overlap was undeniable, but logical. "The same [genetic materials] needed to build your brain," she says, "are also needed to build your heart. It's like a house—you need drywall, bricks, wood for all the rooms of your house. And if those are abnormal, you'll have issues with your kitchen, bathroom and roof."

Drawing a genetic connection between CHD and autism could mean increased diagnostic attention for CHD patients, improving their quality of life, says Brueckner. She maintains a clinical practice in pediatric cardiology. "We need to pay attention to the whole patient—not just the scar on their chest."

Besides "cranking out large sequencing data" with the Yale Center for Genome Analysis, Brueckner's lab is investigating cilia, antennae-like organelles that assist in the heart's development.

Her plan is to keep working to "understand the genetics and biology of CHD . . . and translate those findings into improved care for CHD patients—one gene, and one patient, at a time." *—RM*