

# PITTMED

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*Pitt Med* is published by the Office of the Dean and Senior Vice Chancellor for the Health Sciences in cooperation with the Office of University Communications. It is produced quarterly for alumni, students, staff, faculty and friends of the School of Medicine. PR 6753

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**M**y ambition was to bring to bear on medicine a chemical approach. I did that by chemical manipulation of viruses and chemical ways of thinking in biomedical research.

—Jonas Salk

Dear Pitt Med Reader,

Consider some of the challenges the world confronted during the polio pandemic more than 60 years ago.

An infected person could spread the virus without even knowing they carried it. Disease symptoms varied from none at all to lethal.

Scientists were called on to develop effective vaccines. Then, the world dealt with intellectual property barriers, production cost issues and the logistics of vaccine distribution. Famously, Dr. Salk did not patent the Pitt team's vaccine. ("Could you patent the sun?" he asked.) That, by the way, would not be such a simple decision to make today.

After all that, public health officials had to address vaccine hesitancy in many segments of our population.

This all sounds familiar, doesn't it? History is repeating itself.

Yet we can also take pride in how the situation has evolved: In Jonas Salk's time, our nation pulled together; even children funded the effort by donating their dimes. Today, scientists throughout the globe are sharing information and collaborating, making COVID-19 breakthroughs at a rapid pace. Chinese researchers sequenced the novel coronavirus genome and made it public in January 2020. By the end of the same year, we were inoculating frontline care providers and residents of long-term care homes in the United States.

Though researchers apply some basic principles to manipulate viruses in vaccine development—as Dr. Salk alludes to in the quote above—science has also learned a lot from past outbreaks. The fields of virology and vaccinology have made impressive progress since the 1950s.

Just like our nation did during the polio pandemic, I gain inspiration from the work of Pitt people. In this issue, we feature surgeon Dr. Ala Stanford, who trained here. She set up pop-up COVID-19 testing centers last year to make sure that disproportionately affected Black communities in Philadelphia had access to testing. And patients from throughout the world benefit from the legacy of our own Dr. Eugene Myers, a giant in otolaryngology, whom you can also read about in this issue.

There's not enough room in this 40-page magazine to share all the noteworthy work coming out of our medical school. There never is; yet the scientific efforts this pandemic has galvanized are stunning. For instance, Pitt scientists co-led the efforts to show that steroids are effective in the recovery of severely ill COVID-19 patients. I write this letter just after the U.K. authorized repurposing of approved arthritis medications tocilizumab and sarilumab for emergency use in COVID-19 patients receiving organ support. It turns out these drugs block the effects of the damaging immune molecule IL-6 to improve outcomes in these critically ill patients. REMAP-CAP, the international clinical trial network that learns and adapts as it progresses, was instrumental in demonstrating the potential of these lifesaving treatments. Pitt physicians, notably critical care medicine chair Dr. Derek Angus, led this network with colleagues at universities in Australia, the U.K., Canada and Europe.

Finally, you may have heard that medical schools in this country have received substantially more applications this year than is typical. Applications to Pitt Med are up 20%. Some people attribute this rise to the so-called Fauci Effect. Other factors may be at play, but this much is clear: Young people want to be part of the solution. They want to help us heal. These are our future leaders; we can take solace in that.

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