Robert Weiss, MD

A Legendary Leader in Urology

Ask Robert Weiss, MD, to talk about what stands out over his 50-plus years in the field as a scientist, clinician, and beloved professor and he will tell you he loves the variety, and the way pediatric urology makes him think. “You have to be good at the technical part—that’s a given, but what I like is that if you appropriately think out the problem, as if you were in a chess match, you’ll do well and patients will do well,” said the Donald Guthrie Professor of Surgery, Department of Urology, Yale School of Medicine. “Plus, compared with a lot of other surgical fields, there are great opportunities for research—the scientific aspects of urology are great.

But along with the intellectual, scientific, and technical challenges that come with the territory, the word that crops up most often as he describes his wide-ranging career is fun. “It wasn’t uncommon for me to get in at 7 or 8 AM and still be doing rounds with students and residents at 10 PM at night. But we weren’t tired—we were having great fun!” he said. “I am happiest in the lab and in the operating room,” he said, “and when you are educating residents—they won’t allow you to just do things the way you’ve always done them. You can’t sit and vegetate.”

It’s that kind of flexible attitude, he says, that has helped him continue to adapt in his field, taking advantage of opportunities whenever they came his way. In a 2018 essay in The Canadian Journal of Urology, he wrote, “My career and happiness were shaped…by remembering Yogi Berra’s aphorism, ‘When you come to a fork in the road, take it—and there were many forks.’ One fork was the decision to go into academic medicine rather than private practice. He has not looked back since making that choice. “If you go into private practice, you may end up doing the same thing over and over again, then, by the time you hit 50, you’ll get bored,” he said. In academia, he relishes the combination of doing surgery, plus research, writing, and teaching—especially teaching. “There’s no reason to go into academia unless you are interested to be interested in it all—that’s why I haven’t experienced burnout.”

Another major fork in the road for Dr. Weiss: the decision to go into academic medicine rather than private practice. He has not looked back since making that choice. “If you go into private practice, you may end up doing the same thing over and over again, then, by the time you hit 50, you’ll get bored,” he said. In academia, he relishes the combination of doing surgery, plus research, writing, and teaching—especially teaching. “There’s no reason to go into academic medicine unless you are interested to be interested in it all—that’s what keeps me happy,” he said. “When I started as a resident, for instance, if a patient came in and couldn’t urinate, the only option was to do a prostatectomy. Today, there are new non-surgical ways of delivering medications and therapies, less invasive treatments. I continue to be interested in it all—that’s why I haven’t experienced burnout.”

Along the way, Dr. Weiss has served on nearly every board and committee and received nearly every award possible in the field including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Urodynamic Society; an NIH Merit award (the first urologist to do so); the Keyses Medal awarded by the American Association of Genitourinary Surgeons for (…conf’d.)
Helping physicians to become more critical thinkers is just one of the core competencies taught in Yale School of Management’s Emerging Leaders Program (ELP). For the last six years, in collaboration with Yale Medicine and the Yale New Haven Health System, the two-year ELP program has provided intensive business training to Yale physicians—an extraordinary opportunity not lost on its participants. “Medicine has a very unique economy, and I am very grateful for this unparalleled experience,” said Jaime Cavalle, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor of Urology. “I’ve enjoyed the mentorship and collaboration with my peers, and the access to graduate-level business experts.”

The ELP curriculum covers familiar business school competencies and leadership principles including finance, organization behavior, economics, and project management. Both years of the program are immersive—one day a month of interactive morning and afternoon sessions, for nine months. The second year takes the skills acquired in year one and applies them to the learning goals of ‘Leading Yourself and Leading Others.’

Each nominated by the Yale Urology Chair, several Yale Urology faculty have participated since the program’s inception. For the 2020-21 session, Angela Arlen, MD, Assistant Professor of Urology, Jaime Cavalle, MD, MPH; and Daniel Kellner, MD, Assistant Professor of Clinical Urology, join nearly 80 colleagues in medicine in ELP—double the roster size of previous years. “It’s a fantastic opportunity to prepare for future leadership roles, but most importantly to enhance understanding of the system to better serve our patient population,” said Dr. Arlen.

The program equips faculty with the opportunity to enrich their work life, explains Tim Shea, Learning Experience Manager, Executive Programs, Yale School of Management. “Participants acquire a basic understanding on how to inspire, manage, and lead people. It shows them how to be innovative and look at situations more broadly than they would otherwise.”

“At the end of two years, participants will be able to apply operational principles and understand economic rationale—and when something smells right or smells bad,” said Paul Taheri, MD, MBA, Associate Professor of Urology. “That’s the kind of thing that physicians need in real life and in their professional development.”

The program provides a forum for sharing knowledge and experiences, “It’s a forum for the future leaders in our field to get a theoretical understanding of how to manage and lead,” said Taheri. “You are part of a growing body of leaders who have the ability to lead the field.”

“Throughout the program, I have developed more confidence in my business acumen,” said Dr. Kellner. “I have a better understanding of what’s going on in the business of medicine. It is also gratifying that participating in this program is not about me, but about the patients we care for.”

“Every mentee has a unique perspective. We have the benefit of sharing experiences together with peers from across the medical school,” said Dr. Cavalle. “It is a great opportunity to learn from one another and develop better ways to lead.”

Dr. Weiss is perhaps as proud of the many doctors he has nurtured and sent out into the world as he is of his own children. “They are not genetically related, but they are the next generation,” he said. “You can only do so much to the people you know. But that makes you feel better.”