

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 the field of urology, which he made while serving in the military from 1962 to 1963. “A doctor in

our unit, The Polar Research and Development Corp, located under the Greenland ice cap 138 miles northeast of Thule, Greenland and 800 miles from the North Pole, who was senior to me said, ‘Bob, you have to decide what field you want to be in—why don’t you tell them you’re a urologist.’” That suggestion went along with what his father, who had been a general surgeon, told him. “He said that I should pick any surgical field except general surgery. He knew, back before World War II, that surgeons were already beginning to sub-specialize.”

In contrast, pediatric urology, as a field, was in its infancy, and Dr. Weiss was attracted to the fact that the opportunities were wide open. Dr. Weiss obtained his urologic training at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, where the chair, Dr. John K. Lattimer, was one of the founding fathers of pediatric urology. When he arrived in New Haven in 1967, Yale helped him take advantage of those opportunities, he says. “Yale is a place where you can collaborate; I did well because we all nurtured and helped each other. If you have the desire to do something, you will.”

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 in education—and you have to make yourself available to students.” Asked what his advice might be to students and residents: “Pick an

academic career if you want an exciting life!” he exclaimed. “You can make great contributions in terms of curing patients but also focus in on a specific area of research. I was able to build up a lab, make rounds, see patients, and work on big cases,” he said, still relishing every bit of it.

Whether doing groundbreaking investigations into the physiology of ureteral smooth muscle early on in his career, studying the role of nitric oxide in inflammatory conditions of the urinary tract, or more recently, working with Yale’s biomedical engineering department on the use of nanoparticle-based delivery platforms for therapeutics in the management of benign and malignant diseases, “You have to keep doing things, keep getting more ideas, and if you see a new opportunity—take it!”

Which is why, despite being locked down during COVID-19, doing a Zoom call from his home in North Haven, CT, Dr. Weiss is looking forward to continuing his lab research once the pandemic is over. “There are always new grants and the field is constantly evolving—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 Keyes Medal awarded by the American Association of Genitourinary Surgeons for (...cont’d.)

Robert Weiss, MD

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outstanding contributions in the advancement of urology, and the 2018 Pediatric Urology Medal from the American Academy of Pediatrics. But the award that he specifically mentions is one received most recently—an inaugural faculty teaching award from his urologic residents that was named in his honor: The Robert M. Weiss, MD, Outstanding Faculty Teaching Award. “That’s the kind of thing that makes you feel best—when a resident comes back twenty years later and says, ‘Dr. Weiss—You were the person who helped me become who I am,’ I think that’s what gives you the most pride. Just like when you raise your own kids, you want the students to do well.”

Dr. Weiss and his wife of 47 years, Ilana, have two children, a son and a daughter, and they recently became grandparents. Not coincidentally, both their children became physicians, his son a radiologist and his daughter, like her father, a pediatric urologist. “I didn’t try to influence them, but they must have seen that I was happy doing what I was doing, and that if it was good enough for their father, it was good enough for them.”

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’re not genetically related, but they are the next generation,” he said. “You can only do so much in the four score and twenty years or so that you have, but if you can affect the next generation, that makes you feel better.” **Y**

Mentoring Our Emerging Leaders



Angela Arlen, MD



Jaime Cavallo, MD, MPH



Daniel Kellner, MD

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 Cavallo, 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 Cavallo, 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, Chief Executive Officer of Yale Medicine, and Deputy Dean of Yale School of Medicine.

After arriving at Yale in 2013 from the University of Vermont, Dr. Taheri saw an immediate need for a professional development program for physician leaders—the same type of program he first created at the University of Michigan, and then again at Vermont. “We want physicians to step out of their bubble, and understand how the world really works,” Dr. Taheri said.

To put this training to work, he says the best thing physicians can do is “to ‘use it or lose it.’ Get engaged with their department.” Ultimately, when it comes to how they approach their clinic work or patient flow, “they need to be the quarterback—the central figure who communicates the game plan and lets everyone complete their specific roles.”