ATTENDING
Ruminations on the medical life

What’s life like for husband-wife research teams? Anette and Stefan Duensing share their experiences of togetherness, 24/7.

R
olf and Magda Loeber stick to a morning routine. They plot their workday and hash out issues at their favorite coffee shop—a European-size espresso for him, decaf macchiato for her. (“Mostly milk foam,” she says, by way of explaining why her sturdy ceramic cup is about four times heftier than his.) Then the tall, trim couple stroll down Walnut Street to their exercise club.

“You work hard enough already!” Magda objects, with tenderness, when her husband’s voice betrays some ambivalence about how their research staffers show up at the office earlier than they do. In any event,
she points out, Rolf starts at home by 5 a.m., tackling the monumental amount of work involved in their large-scale, longitudinal studies of delinquency. Likewise, Rolf is solicitous of her: After four decades of togetherness, he knows how his wife’s mind races and churns when she considers a problem or difficulty, so they try never to talk about work after 5:30 p.m., “or Magda would not sleep well.”

Not all husbands and wives who collaborate on research keep such a strict division between work and home life. Some take pleasure in animated work discussions over dinner and late into the night. Others—especially those with young children—have neither the time nor inclination to bring work home very often; they are just glad their partner knows exactly how hectic the day has been. The number of scientist couples continues to rise, and they all must figure out their own balance. (When they work in the same lab or research office, that may well include the question, “Are we both the boss?”)

Among the University of Pittsburgh’s most storied married biomedical couples early on were Thomas and Katherine Detre, who came to Pittsburgh in 1974. He was recruited from Yale University to chair the psychiatry department and eventually led all of the health sciences schools. She would become a Distinguished Professor of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health (GSPH). (See Last Call, p. 40.) David Kupfer, now Thomas Detre Professor of Psychiatry, followed and married Ellen Frank, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology.

Recruited to Pitt’s Department of Psychiatry in 1984, the Loebers have rewarded their employer with exceptional productivity: They have several books, more than 200 research articles, and a stellar grant record to their credit. “We were hired as a couple,” Rolf says—Loeber, R., and Stouthamer-Loeber, M., on research papers—“and both Detre and Kupfer told us to think big.”

They have thought big, but not always in the same way. “We are not Siamese twins,” Magda says, adding: “If I in a meeting say, ‘Well, I don’t agree with Rolf,’ it doesn’t mean that I’m talking about packing up my personal belongings and moving out.”

Some staffers can be startled, and then relieved, by the couple’s willingness to challenge each other openly, albeit graciously. Magda handles most personnel issues with the deftness of a psychologist, which, of course, she is. “This doesn’t happen often, but if people have a beef that involves Rolf, I won’t protect Rolf. They have to feel that I’ll listen, and there’s no penalty for saying this. Usually, I will say, ‘I hear you. You need to take this up with him.’ They know that Rolf will not eat them alive.”

Together for 43 years, the Loebers—both PhDs from Holland, and he a Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry, as well as psychology and epidemiology, and she an associate professor of psychiatry and psychology—may be unique among their contemporaries. Well into the early 1970s, antinepotism rules commonly kept married women from working in medical academia with their husbands. Maria Goeppert-Mayer won the 1963 Nobel Prize in Physics despite having been unable to secure official faculty positions at Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University, and the University of Chicago during the decades her husband was a professor at each of those institutions. Gertrude and Werner Henle, the husband-wife team who were first to link a virus (Epstein-Barr) to a cancer (Burkitt’s lymphoma) as well as mononucleosis, considered themselves equal partners when hired together at the University of Pennsylvania in 1937, but four years passed before Gertrude was promoted even to the level of instructor; she was not made full professor until 1965.

Likewise at Pitt, women sometimes struggled in the historically male-dominated medical-research arena, which Frances Finn (now Reichl) discovered after she married the famous peptide scientist Klaus Hofmann, who chaired Pitt’s biochemistry department. Finn had joined Hofmann’s lab as a graduate student in 1961, which, she says, only made her situation trickier. “I had a difficult time trying to define myself,” she recently wrote by e-mail from her home in Princeton, N.J. “I’m not sure I ever did. Even the Chancellor at the University could not place my face unless I was standing next to my husband;” however, the Chancellor’s wife always could, she adds.

But none of that diminished the sheer joy of collaborating with Hofmann, Reichl says. “People who are not in science don’t understand the thrill of solving a problem, putting all the evidence everyone has collected—including your latest results—together and suddenly seeing an answer no one knows about. It gives you a pretty heady feeling to think that you are the only people in the whole world to know something.”

She and Hofmann worked side by side for some 30 years, living and breathing science in the lab and at home. “Pulling out of the lab to go on vacation was like slowly removing adhesive tape from an open wound for me,” says Reichl, now retired from the Department of Medicine. “I always hated to leave.”

The sentiment is shared by Anette and Stefan Duensing, German MDs who for the last six years have shared lab space at the Hillman Cancer Center, where they run research programs that focus on genomic instability. He is associate professor of microbiology and molecular genetics; she is assistant professor of pathology. They usually drive to work together, rarely leave before 9 p.m., and tend to picnic in Stefan’s office, where the shelves are lined with antique books—include-
They have a complicated arrangement, supervising the same researchers in a shared lab yet maintaining their own separate projects. Still, they can easily oversee each other’s projects when one, say, leaves town for a meeting. For people in their lab, that means no letup. “You have two bosses,” Stefan says, “two people who criticize you.”

Both are intense and driven to make tenure on their own merits. “The advice we got,” early on, Stefan says, “was, ‘Do not put each other on papers, because it could look bad, like you’re not independent researchers.’” So on their first articles, they tried listing just one Duensing. But considering all the intellectual input they lent to each other’s work, that seemed “unnatural,” Stefan says. He and Anette add, at precisely the same moment: “It felt weird.” Most of their recent papers bear both names.

The medical school at Pitt appears to have been ahead of the curve in recognizing advantages to hiring husband-wife teams (and for at least the last two decades has made an effort to find spots for talented, so-called “trailing” spouses, when one in a couple is being recruited). Hard figures are difficult to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests a steep rise in married couples in academic medicine. One local realtor, for instance, has shown homes to more than a dozen couples recruited by the School of Medicine in the last few years. Many double-hires are scientific standouts who publish together frequently: Notables include Kaposi’s sarcoma herpes virus discoverers Yuan Chang (professor of pathology) and Patrick Moore (professor with appointments in microbiology and molecular genetics in the medical school, as well as infectious diseases and microbiology in GSPH). New University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute director Nancy Davidson, an MD, and Thomas Kensler, a PhD professor of pharmacology and chemical biology, also collaborate.

(Interestingly, all three Detre chairs are married to faculty members: neurobiology department chair Susan Amara, a PhD, to Geoffrey Murdoch, an MD/PhD and associate professor of pathology; geriatric medicine’s division chief Neil Resnick, an MD, to Susan Greenspan, an MD professor of medicine; and psychiatry’s Kupfer to Frank.)

In his 12th-floor office at UPMC Presbyterian, Matthew Rosengart is wearing running gear but probably won’t get outside before the sun sets. Behind him are large photos of his children, Anna Elaine and Maevis, and sitting across from him is their mother—his wife—Janet Lee. Rosengart, assistant professor of surgery and critical care medicine, is a trauma surgeon who runs a lab studying calcium in macrophage biology. Lee, assistant professor of medicine, treats critical care patients and investigates chemokine-mediated lung inflammation. They both have the gift, treasured by patients, of appearing attentive and calm, but clearly they live in overdrive.

“We have dinner as a family five nights a week,” Rosengart offers.

“I don’t know about that,” Lee says, “but we try.”

“We try,” Rosengart agrees.

They met at Johns Hopkins University as freshmen, couples-matched in Alabama for their residencies, and have found their research and clinical interests intersecting ever since. “I tend to do a lot of the statistical work [on our papers],” Rosengart, who has an MPH. He also springs into action when Lee needs a quick surgical consult. “There’s warmth in her company,” he muses, “even if it is at a patient’s bedside.”

At home, they say, talk rarely turns to science. Instead, says Rosengart, “We’ll get a glass of red wine and just switch places on the psychiatric couch and talk.”

“He has a good sense of humor, which I need,” Lee adds. Sometimes, when both have had a particularly harrowing day, Rosengart says, “We just hope to God there’s a good comedian on Comedy Central, because we need a good laugh.”