BURKE ELECTED TO IOM

Donald Burke, dean of the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, director of Pitt's Center for Vaccine Research, associate vice chancellor for global health, and professor of medicine in the School of Medicine, has been elected to the Institute of Medicine (IOM). Burke, an MD, joins 15 current and former School of Medicine faculty in this august society of investigators.

IOM members provide consultation and advice to the government and the private sector to improve health care nationally. Over the course of his lengthy career, Burke has contributed to the use of computer modeling of infectious diseases. He is now working on computer models to chart the likely progress of the evolution of infectious microorganisms, the response of the host, and the behavioral changes of an infected population. —Joe Miksch

FOOTNOTE
Down by 12 in the final round, Scott Itano (MD ’09) wagered all his points and answered correctly: “Hypoglycemia.” Itano competed last summer in Next Top Doc, a quiz show on the satellite radio station ReachMD. He faced tough competition from some of the sharpest medical students in the nation, making it to the quarterfinals. Itano’s new challenge is his residency in family medicine at the University of Washington’s Swedish Medical Center.

TRACKING SUPERBUGS

The emergence of “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment has raised adrenaline levels at U.S. hospitals. In 2007, the Journal of the American Medical Association estimated there were more than 78,000 cases of health care–associated MRSA (methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) infection in 2005 alone. The University of Pittsburgh’s Lee Harrison is intent on reining in the superbug problem. He’s getting help from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

With colleagues, Harrison, an MD professor of medicine, epidemiology, and infectious diseases, will tap into a $4.7 million grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Health to take on C. difficile, A. baumannii, and MRSA, sometimes deadly bacteria that are to blame for a large proportion of drug-resistant hospital-acquired infections. The grant will establish a Center of Excellence in Prevention and Control of Antibiotic-Resistant Bacterial Infections, based in Pitt’s School of Medicine, that will attempt to understand how these pathogens develop, how they avoid death at the hands of antibiotics, and how the infections spread. —JM
In his third year in the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Michael Cho’s life is fairly typical—going through his rotations, planning for the future. The years leading up to this point, however, were anything but typical. After entering Cornell University as a premed, Cho switched his emphasis to film, art history, and French. When Cho graduated he moved to Los Angeles, where he studied filmmaking.

From that point, he directed 10 documentaries—including Another America, which focuses on relations between African Americans and Korean immigrants in Detroit.

The urge to study medicine, though, never left him, and, after acquiring a postbaccalaureate certificate in premedicine at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif., he enrolled at Pitt. He hopes to find a way to combine the art of filmmaking with the science of medicine in his practice. He does not find this combination unusual. Referring to the building across Fifth Avenue from the old Children’s Hospital site, Cho noted, “It is called the Medical Arts Building, after all.”

On the disparity between filmmaking and medicine
It is disparate and not at the same time. I think they have a lot in common, because you're always dealing with people, finding out about their history, what makes them tick. And so, in a way, being a doctor and being a documentarian are both like being detectives.

On why he re-entered medicine
I received a grant to travel to the ethnic minority border regions in China. So when I was travelling in China and Korea I came across traditional healers, and I was fascinated by what they did. I had some treatment through a healer there and [thought], Wow, this is amazing.

On combining film and medicine
My scholarly project looks at using patient stories, and I hope to make it an Internet-based piece. The start of it was the idea that med school research has shown that [student] empathy levels peak after the first year [of school, then drop off]. I want to find a way to address that issue, to have people see the person behind the illness.

His question for us
In a world of algorithms, is there a role for creativity in medical decision making?

—Interview by Joe Miksch
Class of 2013 Cheat Sheet

We thought you'd enjoy meeting a few of the members of the Class of 2013 whose bios turned our heads.

Ka’ohimanu Dang, the only native Hawaiian member of the class, saw her grandmother die at age 48 of colon cancer, detected late and undertreated by her physicians. Dang worked for nine years in biomedical research, with the idea that if clinicians couldn’t help her grandmother, then research could. But after noticing the skepticism of the native Hawaiian community surrounding medical research and practice, Dang got another idea. “If I as a doctor say, ‘You don’t have to be scared of this,’ [people are more trusting],” she says.

Fellow first-year Brady Mock loves experimentation, a good trait for a med student. A former state champion wrestler from Utah, he has also dabbled in ballet, wakeboarding, and bungee-jumping. Medicine is an experiment for him, too. He is the first from his family to enter the medical field.

Zachary Tano, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, was drawn to medicine after a memorable tour of duty in Afghanistan. While helping the U.S. Navy Civil Engineer Corps build facilities for the Afghan police force, Tano interviewed many Afghans in local hospitals and felt a strong desire to do something about their poor standard of care.

This spirit of caring and giving extends to Michelle Garcia, who designed a program at the University of San Francisco in which students could donate their excess meal plan dollars to supply family shelters in the area. —BE

FOOTNOTE

You don’t have to be a star athlete to have a bobblehead doll made in your likeness. Renowned University of Pittsburgh orthopaedists Freddie Fu (MD ’77, Res ’82) and Christopher Harner (Res ’86), for example, are immortalized in nodding-doll form.

When members of the 2007 Department of Orthopaedic Surgery residency class prepared for the end-of-year skit roasting their attendings, they kidnapped the mini Fu and Harner and made a video, complete with voice-overs, of their mentors traveling through the world of Pitt orthopaedics.

Then they had bobbleheads made of themselves as a parting gift to Fu and Harner. The dolls now stand sentinel, encased in glass outside Fu’s office, nodding in affirmation at their inspirations.

CLUES TO A CANCER VACCINE

Thanks to a clue provided by the healthy immune system, Olivera Finn believes she may be on to a path that could lead to a cancer vaccine.

Finn, a PhD who is Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of Immunology in the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, found that some healthy people naturally developed an immune response to a protein produced by cells infected with chicken pox and also made in excess in many cancers. Vaccinated mice exposed to a cancer cell line that overexpressed the same protein, called cyclin B1, were able to reject the formation of tumors.

Earlier, Finn developed a vaccine to boost immune response against MUC1, a protein abnormally produced in colon cancer. Because these immune responses are natural, Finn says, there is less concern that boosting them could lead to autoimmune disease.

Finn’s study on cyclin B1 was published in August in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. —JM
Appointments

Michael Boninger has dropped “interim” from his title. He’s now the chair of the University of Pittsburgh Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. The MD has a track record of research that extends from the basic—such as the physiology of muscle—to the applied, engineering medical devices to aid with injury rehabilitation. He is a member of the National Spinal Cord Injury Association’s Hall of Fame.

Boninger’s department stands out for its research activity; it ranks first in National Institutes of Health funding. (Find out more about his faculty’s intriguing studies—from getting stem cells to act their age to mind-controlled prosthetic limbs—in our p. 23 story.)

David Lewis is the new medical director of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic of UPMC and chair of Pitt’s Department of Psychiatry. He follows in the footsteps of David Kupfer and Thomas Detre, who led the department—and, in the case of Detre, the entire academic medical center—to national prominence.

Lewis, the UPMC Professor in Translational Neuroscience who was elected to the Institute of Medicine in 2007, is an MD and a noted expert in schizophrenia. He joined the Pitt faculty in 1987 and has served as a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience as well as director of the Translational Neuroscience Program. Lewis, author of more than 300 publications, has been recognized with a number of honors, including the Stanley Dean Research Award from the American College of Psychiatrists. Floyd Bloom—former editor of Science and former director of the Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation (where Lewis was a visiting scientist)—has said that Lewis “is one of the two or three most outstanding translational neuroscientists of his generation.”

The department of the future, says Lewis, will engage in clinical studies and also build on the foundations of the basic sciences of psychiatry: “There are many fundamental fields of knowledge on which our clinical practice rests—neuroscience, psychology, epidemiology, genetics, to name a few.” Among other priorities they’ll pursue, he expects Pitt faculty to move the field toward rational preemptive interventions. “This is particularly important in psychiatry, because in many ways the target symptoms we treat now are far downstream in the disease process. Many of our treatments are analogous to what a patient with cardiovascular disease receives after a myocardial infarction.”

Donald Yealy is now chair of Pitt’s Department of Emergency Medicine. Yealy, an MD, was vice chair of the department before assuming his new position.

The department has been a worldwide leader in the clinic and the lab for the past 25 years. That presents a challenge, he says: “There’s nothing for me to fix. What I need to do is make sure things continue that way. You either get better or get worse; there’s no standing still.”

Yealy’s own work is wide-ranging. He has examined, among other issues, the differences in the severity of illness experienced by emergency department patients of different races who have congestive heart failure. —Erica Lloyd & Joe Miksch