



John Wright, MD, Says Good-bye

Former dean, pathology chair and honored teacher retires

By
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In August 2005, John R. Wright, MD, retired, bringing to a close a career in which he served UB and the Buffalo medical community for more than 40 years in a variety of capacities, including dean of the School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, chair of the Department of Pathology at UB and Buffalo General Hospital, and interim director of Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

In concluding his career, Wright leaves behind him not only a legacy of solid accomplishments, but also an enduring reputation as a man who served in these high-profile roles with equanimity and finesse. More than a physician-administrator, Wright also retires an honored teacher whom students three times voted recipient of the coveted Siegel Award for Excellence in Teaching.

"I believe John's greatest love in his outstanding career was teaching," says retired surgeon Roger Dayer, MD '60,

a long-time friend of Wright's. The two men met more than 40 years ago, when Dayer was assigned to a six-month pathology rotation while completing his surgical residency at Buffalo General Hospital.

"This proved to be one of the best rotations for me as a general surgeon," recalls Dayer. "John took the time to instruct me in areas that could be of most help, and I certainly benefited from his vast knowledge and teaching ability, as have so many other students, residents and attendings."

James B. Bronk, MD '81, met Wright when he was a medical student in the late 1970s and today considers his former professor both a "role model and friend."

"I experienced firsthand John's warm, thoughtful and scholarly approach to medicine," says Bronk, who served as a member of the Dean's Advisory Council during Wright's tenure as dean. "His legacy of teaching, patient care and service will live on, as it has with other extraordinary UB physicians. With his retirement, the Buffalo medical community is losing a

dedicated and remarkable individual."

Reid Heffner, MD, who worked with Wright for 31 years and succeeded him as chair of the Department of Pathology, says Wright is "one of the most effective and outstanding teachers ever at the UB medical school. He was always on the students' side, seeing their point of view, and he was especially kind to our minority students."

A native of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Wright received his medical degree from the University of Manitoba

in 1959. He served a rotating internship and an additional year in internal medicine at Winnipeg General Hospital and the first two years of his pathology residency at Baltimore City Hospitals. He then moved to Buffalo, where he completed his residency training at Buffalo General Hospital in 1964.

"I was originally going to do my pathology training in Winnipeg," says Wright with a smile in his eyes, "but one of the surgeons whose patient I looked after recognized that I was married to

the head nurse on C-Flat, the pediatric and surgery ward, and he asked Deanna what I was doing the next year and she said, 'pathology.' The surgeon told her: 'A very good friend of mine named Charlie Brennan just moved to Baltimore. Why don't you tell John to get in touch with him.'

"To make a long story short," Wright continues, "I ended up doing my first two years of residency in Baltimore, and when Charlie was recruited here to head pathology at Buffalo General Hospital, he persuaded me to come and be his chief resident, which I did."

Wright then became a National Institutes of Health fellow in endocrinology under Keith Vance, MD, at Buffalo General Hospital, and in 1965 received a two-year Buswell Fellowship.

"I did a lot of teaching," he says. "I used to make up most of the exams for the pathology course for Charlie Brennan, sub rosa, and I gave a few lectures, and I liked it. Then I was invited to teach at Johns Hopkins and went back to Baltimore for seven years."

Although he and his family were very happy in Baltimore, Wright says they knew their stay there would not be permanent because he had begun receiving enticing job offers, including opportunities to head the Department of Pathology at his alma mater in Winnipeg and at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Buffalo. Other offers included surgical pathology positions at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Ontario, and at Case Western Reserve University in



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Cleveland, Ohio.

“At the time, I wasn’t all that enthusiastic about becoming a chair,” recalls Wright. “I just wanted to be a surgical pathologist.”

In 1974, however, Wright received an offer he couldn’t refuse when a lengthy national search resulted in his being recruited back to Buffalo to chair the departments of pathology at UB and at Buffalo General Hospital, positions he subsequently held for 23 years.

“When I was considering taking the job at UB, they were having enormous problems with the pathology course,” he recalls. “In fact, students were pressing the dean to do something about it. And when I looked at the student feedback and the course organization, I felt that I could do something about the teaching program, and that convinced me that I could do the job.”

His task at Buffalo General Hospital was equally daunting.

“The challenge was to build a clinical pathology effort in the hospitals,” Wright says. “Buffalo General was down to one pathologist, and there was internecine warfare within the department, so trying to rebuild the service part of the department became a major part of our mission.”

Over the next two decades, both departments thrived under Wright’s leadership. In addition to dedicating his time to the university and the hospital, Wright also enjoyed a long affiliation with Roswell Park Cancer Institute. From July 1985 through October 1986, he served as interim director of the institute, where, for many years, he had been a member of its board of visitors (which he eventually chaired) and its Alliance Foundation.

Nationally, Wright served as president of the Association of Pathology Chairs and a member of the National Caucus of Basic Biomedical Science Chairs. In



PHOTO BY JENNY LUK

John R. Wright, MD, center, is joined by his son, David, left, and long-time assistant, Nancy Cronk, right, at a reception held in his honor following the 2005 Kornel L. Terplan Lecture in pathology, which he delivered.

addition, he served on the administrative board of the Council of Academic Societies of the American Association of Medical Colleges.

Wright’s many accomplishments as chair of pathology at UB and Buffalo General, as well as his growing national reputation, did not go unnoticed and in 1997 he was tapped for a new leadership role—this time to serve as interim dean for the UB School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

The offer came at time when Wright says he was contemplating stepping down as chair of pathology and was weighing other opportunities that were being presented to him from around the country.

He decided to accept the offer to serve as interim dean at UB, and a year later he was named dean of the school, a position he held until 2001.

As dean, Wright’s most pressing priority was curriculum reform, which had been mandated by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) following a site visit.

In strategizing about how best to implement a restructuring of the curriculum, Wright says he sought advice

from the three deans who had conducted the review.

“The advice I got from them,” he recalls, “is that I had two choices: I could either do it from the faculty up, or from the top down. In the end, they recommended that I ‘Do it from the dean’s office. Put yourself in charge,’ they said. ‘Outline what has to happen and just get it done. It may be quick and dirty, but that’s how we did it.’”

“That’s simply not the way I wanted to do it,” Wright says. “I felt that if we did it from the faculty up, we would have more buy in and it would outlive my tenure as dean or anybody else’s, and that’s the way we did it.”

This spring, Wright and countless others involved in the new curriculum, saw the wisdom of this approach come to fruition, when the new curriculum graduated its first class of students (see “The New Curriculum, It’s Right on the Mark,” winter 2005 issue of *Buffalo Physician* at www.smb.s.buffalo.edu/bp).

Wright’s decision to approach curriculum reform in this way set the tone for his administration, and in the ensuing years numerous other initiatives benefited from a similar approach, including the estab-

lishment of the Mini-Med School, the creation and implementation of a Code of Professional Conduct for students, and the formation of the Medical Emeritus Faculty Group.

Always one to deflect attention away from himself, Wright says, “I think all of my major accomplishments as dean and as chair came through other people. My contribution, I think, was to work behind the scenes and approach challenges from an organizational perspective.”

With a chuckle—and true to form—he adds: “And I think my biggest contribution to the medical school—and one that will continue after I leave—is the

fondly refers to as his “traveling road show,” whereby he gathered current autopsy cases, organized them by theme, wrote clinical presentations for them, supplemented the descriptions with gross and microscopic photographs and then visited the medical school’s affiliated hospitals three to four times a month to present the material to residents, as well as to junior and senior medical students.

The program was an initiative Wright launched himself when he learned from the school’s Residency Review Committee that internal medicine residents were not receiving (or adequately reading) findings from autopsy reports.

ments that are conducive to teaching—were areas of prime concern for him throughout his career.

“I do love teaching,” he says. “It challenges you to explain something complex in a simple, valid way—but not in dumbed-down terms. And seeing the students succeed, to see that they ‘get it,’ is a very positive feeling.”

As his last official teaching duty, Wright gave the pathology lectures in the cardiology module that ended in August.

Having retired, he says, “I’m intent on making a life for myself,” although he doesn’t rule out “pitching in to help out if needed” if it doesn’t conflict with

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professional development of my assistant of 35-plus years, Nancy Cronk.”

Referring to Cronk’s current role as coordinator for the first- and second-year curriculum, Wright adds: “Nancy is absolutely essential to the new curriculum; she is the glue that holds it together.”

In summarizing Wright’s leadership style, Heffner, his long-time colleague, says, “John is an excellent communicator, extremely well organized and a hard worker. He also is a very good listener and respectful of other’s opinions, something that you don’t always find in a person in his position.”

After leaving the dean’s office in 2001, Wright returned to his true passion: teaching medical students and residents. In doing so, he focused his energy on developing an innovative program he

“The committee wanted uniformity in the resident conferences,” recalls Wright. “They didn’t want a different conference for the various hospital sites. I had a long interest in the autopsy, so I decided that my contribution could be that I would organize such a conference.”

A goal of Wright’s before retiring this summer was to organize the cases he compiled for his “traveling road show” into self-contained vignettes that can be used not only in the residency program, but also in undergraduate medical school. Faculty at UB as well as at other medical schools have expressed an interest in using the vignettes as teaching tools.

It is perhaps most fitting that such a project be one of the last things Wright turned his attention to prior to retiring, as teaching—and the nurturing of environ-

plans he’s made.

Among other things, his plans include traveling and spending time with his children—son, David, an ABC news correspondent based in London, England, and his daughter, Carolyn, a tax attorney in Washington, DC—and their families.

In looking back at four and a half decades of work at the highest echelons of academic medicine, Wright welcomes his retirement while acknowledging that his career has been satisfying, if not always predictable.

His parting comments are in step with the man many people at UB will miss not only for his compassion and competence, but also for his quiet, understated style of leadership.

“I’ve had a lot of fun,” he says. “It’s been an enjoyable experience.” **EP**