

Alumnus Profile

Elliot J. Rayfield, MD '67

No Patient Too Difficult

Elliot Rayfield, MD '67, was just a small child when he met the physicians who inspired his interest in medicine and in Jefferson. Residents of West Philadelphia, Rayfield's parents both struggled with chronic health conditions and came to Jefferson for care. Their list of specialists reads like a "who's who" of institutional legends: Kenneth Fry, MD '31; John Templeton, MD '41; J. Wallace Davis, MD '42; Frank Sweeney, MD '51; and more.

"By virtue of my connection to Jefferson through my parents' doctors, it seemed destined that Jefferson would be the place I would wind up going to medical school," says Rayfield, who was particularly affected by his mother's experience with hyperthyroidism, which she developed when he was 10 years old. "Her entire personality changed ... what has always fascinated me is how closely linked behavioral changes are with the physiology of disease. I could actually see her disease come to life."

His mother's condition cast an early lure toward endocrinology, and pursuing his internship and residency at the University of Michigan — known for its strong endocrinology programs — convinced him to build a career in the specialty. He went on to serve fellowships at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital and completed his training at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and the Army Medical Laboratory at Fort Detrick, Md.

When Rayfield was exploring opportunities for academic endocrinology appointments in 1974, a position at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine stood out. The new chief of endocrinology sought a faculty member to create a diabetes program from scratch — and that's what Rayfield did.

"At the time, Mount Sinai was an old hospital but a young medical school, and this was the most challenging of any position I was offered," he says. Over the next 14 years, he climbed the ranks all the way to professor of medicine. Today, he maintains a faculty appointment while managing a large private practice in Manhattan. Throughout his career, he has been able to "do it all" — conducting basic and clinical research, teaching and mentoring at all levels, publishing in top medical journals and caring for patients in his office. He has received many accolades for his contributions to his field, including the Endocrine Society's 2014 Sidney H. Ingbar Distinguished Service Award.

Endocrinology continues to captivate him. "I am still intrigued by how glands can secrete a chemical and have it work in a part of the body that's very far removed from where it was secreted — and by how the combination of these glands works like an orchestra to organize your bodily function," he says.

Rayfield enjoys the challenges that practicing medicine presents but says deciphering the science of endocrinology is far from the hardest aspect of his work. He cites interference from the government and insurance companies into healthcare decisions; the excessive cost of drugs to patients; and difficulty enforcing patient compliance among his most significant professional hurdles. But the single greatest threat to every physician's success, he says, involves technology — specifically the need to enter data quickly into a patient's electronic medical record.

"People don't want you to be a robot. Especially during their first visit, you really have to connect with them ... if you don't, maybe they won't come see you again. The challenge is to match patients

with the best treatment for their psychological makeup," he says. "You have to figure out, what makes them tick? What things matter to them? And then use that information to then decide on a course of therapy... which you can't do if you're hidden behind a computer."

Maintaining quality face time with every patient remains a top priority for Rayfield, whose satisfaction comes from treating the most complicated cases: "My patients are never too difficult and never not worth it. I never give up until we succeed," he says.

Another top priority: philanthropy. As a professor at Mount Sinai, Rayfield learned that financial aid is essential to attracting the best and brightest students to a medical school. During his final year at Jefferson, he received a full scholarship and has felt compelled to repay it ever since. This led to his recent establishment of the Elliot J. Rayfield, MD '67, Scholarship at Sidney Kimmel Medical College. The fund will support medical students based on academic achievement.

"I believe if someone is gifted in a certain area, such as medicine, and feels that an institution such as Jefferson made this possible, there is a moral obligation to help the next generation of students to benefit from one's own success," Rayfield says. "The cost of a medical education has skyrocketed and the remuneration in practicing medicine is much less robust than previously.

"Jefferson provided me with an amazingly thorough education that has allowed me unlimited access to everything I have wanted to pursue. What more could anyone want?"

— Karen L. Brooks



Photo by Karen Kirchhoff