Marshall Wolf, MD

Tapping potential

Dr. Marshall Wolf trains “the best and the brightest,” setting the standard for graduate medical education

BY KRISTIN DEJOHN

Marshall Wolf, MD, emeritus vice chairman for Medical Education at Brigham and Women’s Hospital (BWH), is known as a straight-talking, no-nonsense physician, with extremely high standards—a combination that can be intimidating for young doctors-in-training. He is also described as one of the most generous, nurturing, and effective mentors in medicine.

Wolf, who is legendary for launching the careers of some of medicine’s great leaders, has trained thousands of doctors in a way that brings out the best they have to offer. “He has one of the most effective mentoring styles I’ve ever seen,” marvels Jim Kim, MD, PhD, president of Dartmouth College. “He’s tough, and he expects excellence, but the love he has for his mentees runs deep, and he lets them know that he’s there for them. Marshall has been my mentor since I was in my 20s, and his constant support has been a great gift to me.”

In 1990, Wolf, then director of Medical Residency Training at BWH, took a gamble on Kim and fellow medical anthropologist Paul Farmer, MD, PhD. At the time, the two Harvard graduates had a giant dream and a big dilemma. They had just co-founded Partners In Health to support work in Haiti combating AIDS and tuberculosis. Now, they faced a moral predicament: To become fully trained
physicians, they would have to leave their fledgling operation in Haiti and return to the United States.

“Jim and I saw the poverty and desperate medical crisis, and we just couldn’t leave,” recalls Farmer, co-founder of Partners In Health, chief of the Division of Global Health Equality at BWH, and the United Nations’ deputy special envoy for Haiti. At the time, existing U.S. internal medicine training programs required a full-time presence. Inspired by the duo, Wolf solved the problem by tailoring a research residency program that allowed Kim and Farmer to share a residency and to become trained internists while splitting their time between the two countries.

“This was the first time that social scientists were accepted into the program, and in our case, Marshall allowed our research laboratory to be the rural health centers of Haiti,” notes Farmer.

Wolf also raised donations for Partners In Health, and with the help of BWH’s Howard Hiatt, MD, he created a residency track to train new doctors in global health. “What Marshall did was transformational for us, as individuals, and for our organization,” says Kim. “Not only did he help support us financially, he also helped us create the network of Brigham residents and donors that has been critical to our success.”

Today, Partners In Health is a model community-based healthcare system that relies on public-private sector cooperation, and is currently expanding operations in 12 countries on four continents. “Marshall knew we were trying to build a new field—one focused on creating sustainable, high-quality healthcare in all parts of the world, and he saw the value in that,” says Farmer. “When people have programs or plans that are outside the box, and he thinks they’re worthy, he supports them.”

**Bringing excellence to mentoring**

Wolf, a fan of biochemistry, exudes both a compassion for people and a love of science. “He makes medicine fun,” says Jeffrey Drazen, MD, editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and a senior physician at BWH. “Marshall is a terrific teacher, and he keeps people motivated in medicine. He understands what excites people intellectually and is able to stoke that fire.”

Drazen’s passion at the time of his research residency in 1972 was understanding the physiology of the chemical reactions that lead to asthma. “Though I had clinical commitments, he made sure I had plenty of protected lab time, which was unusual back then.” Drazen’s work with BWH’s K. Frank Austen, MD, ultimately led to the creation of four asthma drugs that are currently helping more than 7 million people breathe easier.

“Whatever work you’re doing, Marshall tries to show you
how it will help improve the lives of patients,” adds Drazen. “And he’s generous with his time. He’s like a great coach who doesn’t seek the limelight himself, but makes it possible for many others to succeed.”

In 1996, Wolf received the second annual Harvard Dental/Medical School Excellence in Mentoring Award after being nominated by nearly 3,000 faculty, staff, students, and post-doctoral fellows. He believes the key to mentoring is pairing the right mentor with the right trainee and serving as a guide. “My job is not to tell people what they should do,” says Wolf. “Rather, it’s to help them find out what they want to do and help them do it. The job of a mentor is to help mentees identify and achieve their goals.”

Transforming medical residency

Well known for his wry and witty sense of humor, his intelligence, and his devotion to patients, Wolf chuckles about his own introduction to medicine. “My mother, who was a child of the Depression, would wheel me around in my baby carriage, introducing me as her son—the future doctor.”

Wolf’s family had immigrated to Chicago from Russia. School came easily for him, and he graduated from both Harvard College and Harvard Medical School. “I had always assumed I’d return to Chicago,” he recalls, “but I couldn’t turn down the opportunities in Boston. My father had only finished the first grade, so I considered myself extremely lucky.”

Wolf also felt fortunate to find great mentors, including Eugene Braunwald, MD, then the new chair of the Department of Medicine at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. “He was the best mentor you could have,” recalls Wolf.

The two initially met in 1972, when Braunwald interviewed Wolf for the position of director of Medical House Staff Programs. “I knew right away that Marshall was perfect for the job,” says Braunwald, chair of the groundbreaking Thrombolysis in Myocardial Infarction (TIMI) Study Group at BWH, which changed how the medical profession treats heart attacks. “We saw eye to eye about the direction of the residency program.”

Providing warmth and rigor

With Braunwald’s support, Wolf implemented sweeping changes, which included expanding the traditional internal medicine residency to add a research residency track and one of the first primary care residency programs in the nation. “At the
Born: 1937 in Kenosha, WI

Education:
• Harvard College, AB, 1958
• Harvard Medical School, MD, 1963

Internship and residency:
• Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, Boston

Additional postdoctoral training:
• Research associate, Biochemistry Laboratory, National Institutes of Health
• Fellow in cardiology, West Roxbury, VA Hospital and Harvard School of Public Health, Boston

Current positions:
• Vice chairman emeritus of Medical Education, BWH
• Director emeritus, Medical Residency Programs, BWH
• Senior physician, BWH
• Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School

Past positions (partial listing):
• Director, Medical Residency Training, BWH (1972–2000)
• Vice chairman of Medical Education, BWH (1996–2002)
• Associate Physician-in-Chief, BWH (1976–1996)

Selected awards and honors:
• Distinguished Medical Educator Award, Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine (2008)
• Internist of the Year, Massachusetts Medical Society (2007)

Memberships (current, partial listing):
• Fellow, American College of Physicians
• Member, Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine
• Member and Past President, American Clinical and Climatological Association

Selected publications:


Family: Married to Katie for 49 years; two children; three grandchildren

Outside interests: Raising orchids, collecting wine, and listening to chamber music

A favorite memory: “I met my classmate and future wife on the first day of medical school at the foot of our cadaver,” recalls Wolf. “Katie has been someone I always turn to for advice, and she’s been extremely supportive through the years—allowing me to work too hard because she knew I was having so much fun.”

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—MARSHALL WOLF, MD
time, residents were learning about emergency cases, but they were not getting much experience in dealing with the average aches and pains of the typical outpatient visit,” notes Wolf. “This became a very popular program.”

A dramatic culture shift was also underway. “Being a resident in the 1970s was like being in the Marine Corps,” recalls Braunwald. “There was a sink or swim mentality. Trainees were pretty much on their own.”

Being a premiere teaching hospital, BWH was a place where most residents would “swim,” but often at great personal cost. “I realized these young people were being driven much harder, had more patients to deal with, and were getting far less sleep than we had when we were residents,” notes Wolf, who had the statistics to prove it. Concerned about the effects these hardships were having on trainees and patients, Wolf lobbied for more compassion, ultimately changing night rotations from every other night to, eventually, every fourth night. “I felt that we should be taking care of these young people. I never believed medicine had to be miserable.”

Under Wolf’s leadership, residents garnered more respect. Conversational interviews replaced the high-pressure exams once used to admit residents. Once enrolled in the program, residents were treated like family. “I first met Marshall in 1981, when he organized a dinner at his house to welcome us to the residency program,” recalls Elizabeth G. Nabel, MD, president of BWH. “I remember being in awe of him. Not only was he one of the smartest people I had ever met, he was such an engaging and kind individual, and a great host.”

Nabel recalls an environment that was both warm and rigorous. “Marshall always expected us to be at the top of our game, and challenged us to be the best doctors we could be. And he always emphasized the importance of improving patient care.”

Lending a helping hand

Wolf, driven to help aspiring doctors, has worked to break down the financial barriers to a medical education with the creation of scholarships. For example, the Minority and Women’s Faculty Development awards are aimed at drawing more minority and women physicians to BWH. He also spends hundreds of hours helping young trainees secure jobs and promotions.

“Marshall always thinks about everyone else above and
beyond himself,” says Joseph Loscalzo, MD, PhD, chair of the Department of Medicine at BWH. “He has humanized the program, placing importance on the happiness of residents both personally and professionally—making it a kinder, gentler program, while actually enhancing the scientific and biomedical rigor.”

Through the years, applications to BWH’s internal medicine residency program have dramatically increased. “As a result of Marshall’s leadership, the Brigham has the best internal medicine residency program in the country,” marvels Braunwald.

A doctor’s doctor
It becomes clear that Wolf is a man of many hats. He is described as a scholar and a lover of wine and chamber music. At work, in addition to being a sought-after mentor, he is a top-rated physician—listing many medical leaders as his patients. “He’s an amazing doctor,” says Michael Zinner, MD, chair of the Department of Surgery at BWH and one of Wolf’s patients. “He’s the only one who’ll walk into my office without knocking, and I don’t mind.”

Zinner admits Wolf’s signature tenacious style helped him solve a serious medical condition. “In 1994, when Marshall first became my doctor, he noticed a problem with my lungs during a regular physical exam and wanted me to have an X-ray. I was busy, and I figured you can’t diagnose much on a physical exam, so I ignored it—until Marshall tracked me down and brought me to X-ray myself. Still, I was too busy, so Marshall got the results and, again, tracked me down and told me to clear my day. Though I protested, I finally did. As it turns out, the lung condition was negatively impacting the quality of my life and required surgery. To this day, I’m still amazed that he could have diagnosed that with a physical exam.”

“Marshall Wolf embodies what every person would hope for when they are sick and at their most vulnerable,” adds Jack Connors, chairman of the Partners HealthCare System. “He is someone who will stay with a patient and solve problems. That patient does not feel alone under Marshall’s care. And he is not only filled with compassion and humanity, he also has a tremendous range of interests. When Marshall enters the room, it lights up because people love to be in his company.”

Inspiring new generations
“Marshall could have done anything in medicine—he’s that smart—and he chose education,” notes Braunwald. “Through hard work and extreme dedication, he turned a job that was once used by people to advance their careers into a very prestigious, ‘destination’ job.”

EUGENE BRAUNWALD, MD, CHAIRMAN OF THE TIMI STUDY GROUP
shoes,” laughs Katz. “I haven’t even tried. I remind people that he hasn’t retired, and that I’ve freed him up by taking over the paperwork.”

Wolf is clearly pleased with the collaborative working arrangement he has with Katz. “Joel has taken the program to greater glory, and I have more time to dedicate to teaching and various projects,” he says. “I always felt I had the best job in the world. Now, it’s gotten even better.”

As Wolf walks the hallways of BWH, seeking to match mentors with aspiring young residents, he often feels a sense of stimulation. “We have the most generous and nurturing mentors at the Brigham and the best and brightest residents. The young people who pass through these doors continue to inspire me.”

For those he’s trained, Wolf remains a fatherly figure. “I still talk to Marshall before all major decisions,” says Kim, who sought his advice about taking the job at Dartmouth College. “When Marshall realized how excited I was, and that I believed I could make a real difference in this position, he gave me his blessing.” In a short amount of time, Kim, who remains on the Partners In Health board of directors, has been able to mobilize the school in many ways, inspiring a donation large enough to create a new healthcare delivery science center at Dartmouth. “I’m excited about a long-term collaboration with both Partners and BWH,” he adds.

On the front lines of the global health movement, Farmer continues traveling to expand the reach of Partners In Health. “Marshall inspired in me a love of teaching doctors. We’re very excited about work that’s underway on the construction of a new training hospital in Haiti, and especially about the opportunities it will create for young clinicians, both American and Haitian.”

Perhaps Wolf’s greatest legacy is the hopeful spirit that permeates BWH. “Many of us came to Marshall with our dreams and he said, ‘You can do that,’ ” recalls Nabel. “When you give confidence and assistance to young people like he does, you can inspire them to change the world.”

Medical residents and students hoist Wolf in an affectionate salute to his untiring commitment to mentoring young doctors-in-training, at a ceremony at Harvard Medical School in 1997.