

# LETTERS

## Wiegenstein's Legacy

With a sense of kindred loss following the news of Dr. John Wiegenstein's tragic and untimely death (see page 48), I quickly went to the Internet to find more information. I came across an article in *Medicine at Michigan* about John's visionary leadership in emergency medicine ("The Emergence of Emergency Medicine," summer 2003), which chronicled his work and included the story of a boy he once saved by performing an emergency tracheostomy. That tracheostomy was done during John's early efforts to develop the specialty of emergency medicine, and I was moved to read that it represented to him later in life some measure of what he had achieved. I was the boy whose life he saved, and I would like to share my thoughts on the impact John had on me and millions of others.



Wiegenstein

While working in an emergency department during medical school at U-M in the 1950s, John developed an appreciation for the need for physicians and staff trained specifically to manage all of the emergencies that may present. At that time, there were no residency-trained emergency physicians, no formal emergency medical services and no staff specifically trained to manage emergencies. If you arrived, alive, at the emergency room, you had no idea who would care for you. You would initially be seen by a nurse who would then contact a physician somewhere in the hospital. One thing could be guaranteed: the physicians who cared for you most likely had no formal training in managing emergencies, and if they did, it was probably specific to only the specialty in which they were trained.

In 1968, John and seven other physicians gathered in Lansing to found the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). John and others began educating themselves on managing emergencies, using whatever resources they could find. They began formalized training for educating others on how to provide safe and quality emergent care, as well as began the

long process of earning emergency medicine the distinction of specialty status. John said it all in the first ACEP newsletter in 1969: "We are, in a sense, a new breed of doctors dedicated to a new concept of medicine."

The American Board of Medical Specialties recognized emergency medicine as the 23rd medical specialty in 1979. Primary board status was granted in 1989, 10 years to the day that emergency medicine was recognized as a specialty.

John served as ACEP's first president and also as the third president of the American Board of Emergency Medicine. He served as emergency medicine's first delegate to the American Medical Association and the American Board of Medical Specialties. In Lansing, John founded the Tri-County Emergency Medicine Services Council and the Michigan State University Emergency Medicine Residency Program.

What underlies John's many important accomplishments are the personal qualities and attributes which enabled him to achieve and made him the special person he was. Everyone who met John was touched by his generosity, kindness and humility. His fatherly disposition, perhaps gained in part from his early work in the seminary, comforted his patients, family, friends and co-workers. He made them feel welcomed, appreciated, and as if, for that moment, they alone had his interest. He was a tireless visionary who learned from his adversities and continued to drive forward.

John taught us to train well for everything in order to reduce the stress of not knowing what might come through the door next.

In emergency medicine, stress and tragedy can have a substantial impact on the care providers. For some, when the challenges became difficult to overcome or negotiate, John provided counseling and guidance to keep them healthy and productive. John taught us to train well for everything in order to reduce the stress of not knowing what might come through the door next. He had the ability to lead, uniting people by using their best qualities. Once asked how he got a bunch of individuals to accept his vision, he replied "I went around to

each of them, pitched it, and made them think it was their idea ... I didn't care if I got credit for it or not."

John is responsible for mentoring many within the emergency medicine community, and those individuals then helped train me and thousands of other emergency care providers across the country. Leaders of emergency medicine now travel to other countries to educate, train and develop systems to perform at the level we've accomplished in America. Millions of patients now receive safe, quality emergency health care due to the work of John and all those who worked with him, and those who have followed. The legacy John leaves behind is enormous, and enormously inspiring.



Prodingler

I would not be where I am today in my career without the work of John Wiegenstein. I will always be thankful for his foresight and vision, and his ability to undauntedly apply his skills to saving my life when I was a child. As an adult, meeting

him was a special and thankful moment. It was a joy to work with him, and the memories are forever gratifying.

Thanks, John.

Robert Prodingler, M.D.  
Richland, Michigan

## In the next I S S U E

of *Medicine at Michigan*: Global REACH: Michigan students experience medicine's cultural differences ... U-M faculty-physicians volunteer health care services around the globe ... intriguing connections between inflammation and diseases of the lung. Also: Match Day 2005 links doctors-to-be with residency programs; the Cancer Center's PsychOncology Program improves quality of life for cancer patients; and a Michigan researcher weighs in on the vitamin D debate.