

Three Careers — and Counting

A Q&A With Marion J. Balsam, M.D.

MARION J. BALSAM, M.D. ('66), started crusading for children the day her best friend in the fourth grade died of leukemia, which is when she resolved to become a doctor. After receiving a B.A. in philosophy at Cornell, she earned her medical degree at NYU, interning in pediatrics. Dr. Balsam completed a residency in pediatrics and a fellowship in metabolic disease at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She joined the U.S.

Navy in 1975, caring for military families and rising through the ranks to become a commanding officer of various teaching hospitals. She retired in 2000 with the rank of rear admiral.

Dr. Balsam is currently the Research Partnerships Program director for the National Children's Study, led by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. Dr. Balsam has four children and five grandchildren. One of her daughters, Marissa Hale Kaminsky ('04), is completing her residency in psychiatry at NYU. Dr. Balsam, who has been honored with an Alumni Leadership Award, recently discussed highlights of her career with *NYU Physician*.

Q. Why should the average person care about the National Children's Study?

A. The study is exciting and important because it's going to have an enormous impact on the lives of future generations of children, influencing both healthcare policy and healthcare itself. It's the largest study of its kind ever conducted in the U.S. — a longitudinal, observational study of 100,000 children in 105 communities across the country. We'll study them from before birth through age 21. We're interested in the effect of the environment on child health and development because children appear to be most vulnerable to environmental insults, as we call them. We define "environment" broadly to include the chemical environment (pollution, pesticides), the physical environment (housing, neighborhoods), the psychosocial-cultural environment (child-rearing, socioeconomic influences), and the biological environment (infections, inflammation). We now recognize that our health reflects a combination of nature and nurture, so an important aspect of the study is gene-environment interaction.

We'll study such outcomes as birth defects, schizophrenia, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, asthma, diabetes, and obesity to find out which environmental factors are harmful, which are harmless, and which are actually helpful. We'll collect enormous amounts of data — the makings of a unique national treasure. It will give rise to new research into the mechanisms of many diseases



and disorders. The study will go on for more than 25 years, but within the first few years we'll have results to share with the public.

Q. How does someone tender enough to be a pediatrician become tough enough to be a commanding officer?

A. Practicing pediatrics may seem a far cry from running a major medical complex, but actually the transition is easier in the military. Most of the years of my practice were in Navy medicine. With each new job, I was carefully groomed for the next, so the transition was gradual. Even though I was a woman in what is traditionally viewed as a man's role, I was never aware of any discrimination against me. In fact, I had supportive bosses who encouraged me to keep moving ahead.

As commander of the Naval Medical Center at Portsmouth, Virginia, my staff numbered 5,000, which was certainly a lot less intimate than practicing pediatrics. But either way, I was influencing the healthcare of many, and I loved both ways of doing so.

Q. After such an accomplished life in medicine and the military, what inspires you to make animal-rights activism a "third career"?

A. Tragically, my youngest son, Cliff, died in a mountain-hiking accident in 2004. He was an engineer by trade but an animal-rights activist by passion. After his death, I committed myself to carrying on Cliff's work, crusading for animals subjected to needless suffering. It's sad to think that it took me so many years to become sensitized to animal abuse. I guess we learn from our children. People ask me if I'm an activist. One might not think of a Navy admiral as a typical activist, but it would seem I've become one. I'm currently trying to persuade the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences — the "military medical school" located in Bethesda, Maryland — to stop using live animals for medical-student education, as they do by practicing surgery on pigs.

There are better, more humane alternatives, such as simulation technology. Of the 154 medical and osteopathic schools in the country, only 10 still use live animals for training. I'm pleased to say that NYU, like all 14 medical schools in New York State, does not use this antiquated practice. So I guess, under Cliff's influence, I've journeyed from caring for people to caring about all living things. ●

Solomon A. Berson Medical Alumni Achievement Awards for 2008

On Alumni Day — April 12, 2008 — alumni and faculty of the School of Medicine were recognized for their outstanding achievements. The awards were presented by Dean & CEO Robert I. Grossman, M.D., who greeted more than 400 alumni and guests.

Award in Basic Science

● **JONATHAN D. BRODIE, M.D.** ('75), is vice chair of psychiatry. In 2000 he became the Marvin Stern Professor of Psychiatry and served as interim chair from 2005 to 2006. He pioneered the application of neuroimaging techniques — in particular, positron emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance (fMRI) — to the study of the pathophysiology of psychiatric disorders. He devised a strategy for measuring pharmacological activity in the living brain using PET technology. One of those experiments led to the development of a new pharmacotherapeutic strategy for the

treatment of drug abuse, which targets an enzyme that modulates the response that seems to be common to all drugs of abuse. For studies that range from characterizing a new pathway for cholesterol biosynthesis, to determining the kinetic mechanisms regulating the interaction of folic acid and vitamin B₁₂, to in vivo imaging of human neurochemistry, he has been elected as a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. ●

Award in Health Science

● **LAWRENCE G. SMITH, M.D.** ('76), a master clinician, is a national leader in improving medical education and linking educational innovation to improved medical care. He made outstanding educational contributions to the residency program at Stony Brook University. At Mount Sinai School of Medicine, he gained national recognition as head of the Division of Medical Education and led a major transformation of the curriculum. He rose to leadership positions in the American College of Physicians, the Association of Program Directors (serving as president), and the American Board of Internal Medicine.



(from left) Lawrence G. Smith, M.D., Jay L. Grosfeld, M.D., Jonathan D. Brodie, M.D., and Lisa Marie Campanella, M.D.

At North Shore–LIJ Health System, he was chief academic officer and senior vice president of academic affairs, chief medical officer, and, most recently, founding dean of the new medical school, a joint venture of Hofstra University and the North Shore–LIJ Health System. ●

Award in Clinical Science

● **JAY L. GROSFELD, M.D.** ('61), is a pioneer in neonatal surgery, surgical education, and pediatric surgical oncology (innovating multidisciplinary approaches to neuroblastoma and rhabdomyosarcoma). He returned to NYU as assistant professor of surgery in 1970 and two years later was appointed the first director of pediatric surgery at Indiana University and the first surgeon-in-chief of the Riley Children's

Hospital, positions he held for 33 years. He led the development of pediatric surgery in the state and set the standard for the surgical care of infants and children. In 1985 he was appointed chairman of the Department of Surgery at Indiana University School of Medicine, the first pediatric surgeon in the country so honored. He also served as the Residency Training Program director in both general surgery and pediatric surgery. He has served as president of the American Surgical Association, the oldest and most prestigious surgical society in America. ●

Julia Zelmanovich Young Alumni Award

● **LISA MARIE CAMPANELLA, M.D.**, ('00), was honored by the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine (SAEM) as a senior medical student. As a resident in NYU's Emergency Medicine Training Program, she was

appointed administrative chief in her final year of training. She won scholarship and recognition awards in three consecutive years from the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), including the 2004 New Jersey ACEP Resident of the Year Award. In 2004 Lisa accepted a position in the Emergency Department of St. Joseph's–Wayne Hospital in New Jersey. She represented the interests of patients and physicians on legislative and regulatory committees, served on the New Jersey ACEP board, and presented her academic research at regional and national conferences sponsored by these professional societies. In 2004 she took her skills and talents overseas as a visiting clinical anatomy instructor at the medical university in Bologna, Italy. ●