

Shaping the Future of Surgery

Carol Scott-Conner, M.D. ('76), Ph.D., M.B.A.

LIKE SO MANY MOMS IN THE 1950S, Dr. Carol Scott-Conner's mother taught her to sew. Unlike most mothers, however, she also gave her daughter the heart whenever she prepared a turkey. "I would dissect it," recalls the woman who went on to become the second female to chair a department of surgery in the United States.

"I was interested in what was inside, and how it worked. From the earliest age, I was curious about the sciences; I wanted to know the names of all the animals and stars. I wanted to understand everything."

Although many thought science a closed door for women in the 1960s, her father, a physicist, encouraged her to believe she could walk right through that door. Being shy and soft-spoken "complicated things," she says. But intellectual curiosity and the self-confidence she developed because of her father's faith in her helped, and she decided to pursue her dream of a career in medicine.

To prepare herself, she studied electrical engineering at MIT because she thought this would be good preparation for surgery. Her father had pointed out that technology was increasingly important in medicine. "Doctors," he told her, "don't understand machinery well enough."

In 1976 she graduated from NYU School of Medicine. By then, Dr. Scott-Conner says, "I had realized I probably wasn't

going to find a cure for cancer, but still I wanted to make a real difference." She came to the realization that she loved surgery, which she calls the "fixing of people," and she stayed on at NYU to do her residency. She was chief surgical resident. A legendary teacher, Dr. Frank Spencer, M.D., then chairman of the Department of Surgery (and now in charge of the New Clinical Facility Initiative), inspired her to set her sights even higher. "I got the sense from him that to head a department of surgery was the most important thing you could do in the whole world," she says. "Not only could you help patients and pass on knowledge to your students, but you could be active at a national level, shaping the future of surgery."

First, she needed more education and experience as a surgeon. In 1988 she earned a Ph.D. in anatomy and cell biology at the University of Kentucky. Beyond that, "I knew I would need to demonstrate I had administrative skills," she says. So, in 1995, while she was chief of staff at University

Hospital in Jackson, Mississippi, and a full professor on the University of Mississippi School of Medicine faculty, she went to night school at Millsaps College to get an M.B.A. "She is indefatigable," says H. Leon Pachter, M.D., an NYU colleague who has known her since 1975 and today is the George David Stewart Professor of Surgery and chairman of the Department of Surgery. "A first-rate intellect and 100 percent devoted to the job at hand."

She was ready, and she knew it. But, she adds, "I also knew the field of surgery had been dominated by men for a long time. I could tell the people interviewing me were thinking, 'You are a woman and our department is mostly men. What makes you think you can lead them successfully?'" The members of the Department of Surgery at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine had the insight to see that she would be a great leader; in 1995 she accepted their chairmanship.

For nine years Dr. Scott-Conner led the department. Once she was in the job, she felt her authority was respected by colleagues and patients. The achievement she is proudest of is establishing the University of Iowa as a Level I Trauma Center. She also worked hard to increase the percentage of surgical residents who were women. And, while she was chairwoman, she continued writing and published *Minimal Access Surgical Anatomy*. She has five textbooks to her credit, including *Operative Anatomy*, a text that has become a standard. Nor did she stint on her research: She is author or coauthor of more than 125 articles.

"I finally retired in 2004," Dr. Scott-Conner says, "when I realized I was ready to spend my time focusing on patients again. I am an old-fashioned surgeon at heart." Today she is professor of surgery in the Division of Surgical Oncology at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. "Surgery, like cabinetry or sculpture, is all about doing something with your hands," she says. "Then this amazing thing happens. In the weeks and months that follow, the patient comes back again, and because of what you did with your hands they are healed."

Jean Arndt, breast center care coordinator at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, knows first-hand how much Dr. Scott-Conner's patients value her kindness as well as her expertise. "Many times, when I'm taking patients into exam rooms," Arndt says, "they tell me how good they felt in the operating room because she held their hands while they went to sleep." ●

▶ Dr. Scott-Conner (right) with Dr. Kristine Orion, a surgery resident at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine.

