DISTINGUISHED CONTRIBUTION AWARD—

LAWRENCE S. ROSS, MD

Lawrence S. Ross, MD, Clarence C. Saelhof Professor Emeritus at UI Urology, has received many honors during his 50+ year medical career: the Distinguished Reproductive Urology Award from the Society for the Study of Male Reproduction in 2012 and a Distinguished Service Award from the Chicago Urological Society last year, among many others.

This year, Dr. Ross added to his list of honors when the American Urological Association (AUA) named him a recipient of its Distinguished Contribution Award, given for “contributions to the field of reproductive medicine and for many years of dedicated service to the AUA.”

Dr. Ross, a past president of the AUA, who also served on the association’s board for five years, is humbled by the recognition. “It is a very big thing in a urological career, even if you’ve been president, to be recognized like this. This is a singular honor in one’s academic career.”

The Distinguished Contribution Award is given to only a few AUA members every year, and is tied to expertise and service in a discipline or subspecialty of urology, for exemplary military duty, or for distinguished service recognized by colleagues. Dr. Ross’ illustrious career and its accomplishments check all these boxes—and more.

First, his work in male fertility was pioneering, developing the first in vitro fertilization (IVF) center in Chicago in the 1980s with, among others, Gail Prins, PhD, Michael Reese Professor of Urology and Physiology and fellow AUA awardee (see related article). Second, Dr. Ross held a senior role in the military with the rank of Lieutenant Commander during the Vietnam War where his contributions included what became the foundation of his work in male fertility and reproduction.

And finally, his clinical, educational, and mentorship activities—at UI Health and Michael Reese Hospital (where he served prior to coming to UI Urology in 1989), on behalf of the AUA, and in training generations of urologists—stand out for their breadth and scope.

When Dr. Ross’ AUA presidential term ended in 2007, he became active on AUA’s behalf advocating for the advancement of research and treatment of male reproductive issues for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), he said. “Our work ultimately led to CDC forming a section on male reproductive health and men’s health. There is now a permanent CDC liaison who attends meetings at the AUA focusing on male health and reproduction.”

Dr. Ross became interested in the area of male reproductive health as a medical

FROM DR. NIEDERBERGER

Welcome to the 2020 issue.

Since we last published, a lot has happened in the world—notably the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created upheaval on so many levels. Like all of you, we have put public health and the safety of our patients, colleagues, and families first. We hope you and those close to you are well and safe.

In the article in this issue about receiving a Presidential Citation from the American Urological Association, Gail S. Prins, PhD., Michael Reese Professor of Urology and Physiology, says, “You have to give something back...you can’t just take.”

To those who know and respect Dr. Prins and Lawrence S. Ross, M.D., Clarence C. Saelhof Professor Emeritus, (also featured in this issue), Dr. Prins’ words are an understatement of the humility and dignity demonstrated over long and distinguished careers by these two superlative individuals. They are the embodiment of giving—and giving back.

COVID-19 denied Dr. Prins and Dr. Ross the ability to be recognized in person at AUA (whose annual meeting was held virtually), but that does not take away from their deserved honors. Please read our profiles of them in this issue—along with other Department news, including about our graduating residents and new residents.

Enjoy.

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**MEET OUR NEW RESIDENTS**

**Halsie Donaldson, MD.** is a 2020 graduate of Georgetown University School of Medicine. She attended Georgetown University where she received her M.S. in Biohazardous Threat Agents and Emerging Infectious Diseases in 2015, and her B.S. in Biology of Global Health in 2013. Halsie, a California native, has great interest in international healthcare and has participated in multiple medical programs in countries such as Argentina, Haiti, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya.

**Gabe van de Walle, MD.** completed medical school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Medicine in 2020. Gabe volunteered extensively and continues to mentor students in the UIC College of Medicine. He received his B.A. in Neuroscience and East Asian Languages & Culture from University of Pennsylvania.

**GENITAL RECONSTRUCTION FELLOW**

**Alexi Millman, MD.** completed her urology training at University of Toronto where she also attended medical school. Alexi received her MPH from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and her B.S. with honors from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Alexi sees an unmet need in Canada for urologists with fellowship training in gender affirming surgery and plans to meet that need and improve the surgical landscape for gender-affirming care in Canada.

**ANDROLOGY FELLOW**

**Danielle Velez, MD.** is a 2020 graduate of the residency program at Warren-Alpert School of Medicine at Brown University. She received her B.S. from John Hopkins University in 2009 where she also attended Medical School, matriculating in 2015. Dani has taught as a volunteer for many years and she intends to pursue academic practice upon completion of the fellowship.
student at the University of Chicago, earning his MD in 1965. His research focused on hormonal conditions and their connection to gender. His interest in male reproduction was one of the factors that led him to urology.

During the early part of his career, in surgical and urological residences at Michael Reese and the West Side Veterans Administration Hospital, Dr. Ross recalled he “did everything: cancer, pediatrics, even kidney transplants.”

But he noted that male infertility was a particularly underserved area. The lack of a subspecialty led him to go out and learn what he needed to become an expert, even teaching himself how to do microsurgery, which is important for reversing vasectomies and reconnecting microscopic tubes that conduct sperm from the testicles.

Dr. Ross credited his experience in the military as Chief of Urology at the Baltimore Public Health Service Hospital as giving him the opportunity to build expertise in the field. His work exposed him to a diverse array of patients and cases, including active-duty military and veterans, for whom he performed “hundreds of vasectomies a month,” he remembered.

But he also encountered men who had entered the service thinking they didn’t want children but changed their minds and sought vasectomy reversal—or who had been wounded and needed reconstructive work—so they could father children. He learned vasectomy reversal techniques by spending hours with ophthalmologists learning how to adapt the microscopes they employed for his urological procedures.

The microsurgeries he performed on dozens of military patients from vasectomy reversal to correcting war-related genital injuries have had significant medical and social value. “That work, and the work I did in reproductive health and fertility after the war, contributed a lot to the peace of mind for many men for whom parenthood, and, in some cases, normal genital and sexual function would otherwise have been hopeless,” he recalled.

“Many of those men had served in Vietnam and undergone terrible physical and psychological injuries so it is meaningful to have provided such relief.”

Dr. Ross joined the Urology Department at Michael Reese Hospital in 1972 and became Department Chair in 1984. He transitioned to Head of UI Urology in 1989 when the two departments merged their training programs. At UI Health and Michael Reese he worked with Antonio Scommegna, MD, a noted female fertility pioneer and former Head of the UI OB-GYN Department.

“As I worked in the field, especially doing IVF work, many of the reproductive endocrinologists, and many in OB-GYN in general, believed that we didn’t need to pay much attention to the male and his reproductive health because of IVF,” he said. “But IVF didn’t solve the problem, especially for the ten percent of men who have no sperm. They were written off completely.”

Dr. Ross, Dr. Prins, and a few others were committed to finding alternatives for these men beyond surrogacy. They learned that if they took biopsies from these patients, some did have small amounts of sperm that could be harvested from the testes and cryopreserved to help them father children. Their work also affirmed that frozen sperm was as effective as fresh sperm in IVF fertilization and pregnancy rates, something Dr. Ross believes contributed a great deal to the field, especially since half of reproductive health problems are associated with men.

“When you can help people have children—that’s just a different class of gratefulness from patients,” he said. Dr. Prins, who has worked with Dr. Ross for more than 30 years, said that Dr. Ross clearly has left his mark. “Larry was in that first wave of urologists who started specializing in clinical aspects and treatment activities in male reproduction, so he really is a pioneer.”

As a teacher and mentor, Dr. Ross’ accomplishments are similarly robust. He is perhaps most proud of his work with Dr. Craig Niederberger, UI Department Head and Clarence C. Saelhof Professor and Professor of Bioengineering, who began his urology residency under Dr. Ross’ tutelage at Michael Reese, then finished his residency at UI Urology. Dr. Niederberger’s interest in male fertility and andrology is tied to Dr. Ross: after Dr. Niederberger completed fellowship work at Baylor College of Medicine, they created one of the first male infertility fellowships in the country at UI, one that has trained many fellows in its 20+ years.

“Dr. Ross is everything one would want from an academic physician and surgeon: brilliant clinical skills, unmatched research and teaching abilities, tremendous mentorship, dynamic leadership, and a warm, welcoming personality,” Dr. Niederberger said.

“He is a model to our profession and our Department.”

Dr. Ross is particularly proud that Dr. Niederberger forged his own interdisciplinary reputation in the field. “Craig is the first urologist to be a joint editor of Fertility & Sterility,” he said. “All the past editors have been reproductive endocrinologists, but Craig’s many contributions to the field earned him this deserved appointment. It’s a major accomplishment for him and our Department.”

In his truly modest fashion, Dr. Ross takes great pride in the accomplishment of others, and ties their successes to his own achievements, including those that will be recognized by AUA. “I’ve watched honors conferred on many of my colleagues and I am proud that their academic and patient care achievements have been recognized,” he said. “To be one of those people recognized at this stage of my life is a great honor.”
To Gail S. Prins, PhD., Michael Reese Professor of Urology and Physiology, the notions of service and giving back to the community have been instilled since childhood. Dr. Prins’ mother was a teacher and professor, her father a minister, and their influence clearly established a sense of duty and service.

“You have to give something back…you can’t just take,” Dr. Prins said. “Whatever someone asks you to do on a volunteer level, it’s rewarding to give to the community, and the community improves as a result.”

A commitment to service—matched by an astounding record of accomplishment as a researcher and teacher—defines Dr. Prins, named a Presidential Citation recipient by the AUA for 2020 “to individuals deemed to have significantly promoted the cause of urology.”

Her 40+ years in the field have earned her countless forms of recognition from organizations in multiple fields, affirming her status as a leader on several fronts: a highly regarded interdisciplinary figure; a pioneer in reproductive research; and a world-renowned woman in a male-dominated field.

An expert in male reproductive health and prostate research, Dr. Prins has stood out in a field that has, as she put it, “a paucity of women,” especially in research. But to her, given her interests as a PhD student in physiology at UI Health in the 1970s, “the male side of research wasn’t strange; it was just natural for me,” she added.

A graduate of Trinity Christian College, Dr. Prins earned a National Institutes of Health (NIH) postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Urology and Center for Reproductive Science at Northwestern University Medical School upon completing her PhD in 1979, then joined the Department of OB-GYN at the Fritzker School of Medicine at the University of Chicago, founding and directing its in vitro fertilization and andrology laboratories, which it operated jointly with Michael Reese Hospital, in 1983.

She came to UI Health’s Department of OB-GYN in 1990, and over the past 30 years at UI has held professorships in the Departments of Urology, OB-GYN, Physiology & Biophysics, Pathology, Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences, and Epidemiology & Biostatistics. She also co-leads the UI Cancer Center’s Prostate Cancer Working Group and has, since 2017, served as co-director of the Chicago Center for Health and Environment, a University of Illinois and University of Chicago NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences Core Center.

Her federally-supported work in prostate health and its connection to cancer susceptibility and hormone regulation over the past three decades is groundbreaking and has covered funding from agencies as diverse as NIH, the Department of Defense (she has received multiple funding grants from each), and the Environmental Protection Agency. Dr. Prins noted that she’s “always had a robust laboratory operation that’s been recognized and funded by the federal government, and I’m proud of that.”

Much of this work has been critical to understanding chemicals that exist in the environment and their effects on human health. She is particularly noted for her research around Bisphenol A (BPA), a chemical widely used in the manufacture of plastics for goods such as food containers and water bottles. BPA essentially mimics estrogen, so even at low rates of ingestion can increase susceptibility to prostate cancer, especially as men age. Her work has traced the potential ill effects of BPA to early development as well as its possible effects on men who have prostate cancer. Further, it has raised significant awareness worldwide around the chemicals that are part of our daily lives and the possible environmental and health effects they can have long-term.

Dr. Prins’ work in this area is world-recognized, and, though she is quite modest, she acknowledges her role as “a leader in this area.”

“Some of the awards and press I’ve received have come from these studies and pushing the field in that direction to look at how these findings, while they may not directly cause prostate cancer, may make men more susceptible to that disease,” she said.

She also is a pioneer in IVF, alongside Lawrence Ross, MD (see related story) in setting up the first IVF program in the Midwest at Michael Reese Hospital in the early 1980s. During that time, she created a sperm banking program, an expertise that proved critical as the HIV crisis peaked in the mid-1980s.
When we learned that HIV could be transmitted through sperm, we had to switch out all our inseminations through frozen sperm; prior to HIV if a couple needed intrauterine insemination with donor sperm, they would get donors, come to the clinic, produce semen samples, and we would do the insemination the same day,” Dr. Prins said.

“When we found that HIV was being transmitted through blood and semen, we had to change the entire program and set up a cryogenic program in which we quarantined all semen samples for six months before they could be used. This development was critical when we started seeing cases of HIV-tainted blood donations. I was at the forefront of that, and ever since we have had to screen for a lot of viruses in IVF programs. There’s a great deal of screening that now goes into sperm cryopreservation and banking, for HIV, hepatitis, other sexually transmitted diseases, and others.”

She and Dr. Ross published several foundational papers on sperm cryopreservation and fertility, work recognized for its research and clinical importance all over the world and have contributed to the reputation both enjoy from their peers.

The honors Dr. Prins has received are lengthy. They include a Distinguished Service Award in 2019—one of three awards she has received from the Society for Basic Urologic Research (SBUR), a group she served as president in 2015–16. A past president of the American Society of Andrology (ASA) from 2003–04, she received that organization’s Distinguished Service Award in 2001 and Distinguished Andrologist Award in 2014. She has received multiple awards from UI Health and the College of Medicine for research, innovation, and teaching as well.

She is proud of the recognition she has earned for her service to the AUA, SBUR, ASA, for work on committees and causes in those organizations too long to list. “I’m very passionate about being involved in societies that coalesce people and bring about the change in growth in the field,” she said.

“That stuff doesn’t happen by magic; it comes from a lot of people who dedicate themselves and volunteer their time to work on committees, to lobby, to build working groups, and effect change.”

She was a bit startled, she acknowledged, to hear about her AUA honor. “I’ve been working with John Lynch, MD (the AUA president) for the past two years, since he became president-elect, on research strategies and policy enhancement, and when he called to tell me about the award, I was tickled pink,” she recalled.

“They don’t give out a lot of these, especially for research. I was really honored to be recognized for contributions to research and the research agenda within AUA, especially because most of the awards are given for clinical work.”

The AUA presidential citation, Dr. Prins said, is important to her because it recognized the importance of research and advocating for research “within the AUA community.”

“This award is of particular importance to me because it’s a large society, one whose primary emphasis is in the clinical realm, and it’s very meaningful that the president wants to include research advocacy and growth of the research capacity within the AUA.”

“Dr. Prins’ contribution to our field—and many fields—is unmatched,” said Dr. Niederberger, Urology Department Head. “She has given so much to urology and the department, not to mention environmental health, here at UIC, across the Chicago region, and globally. No one is more deserving of honors in general, and this one in particular from the AUA.”

That her achievements have drawn the attention of the AUA presidency is important to Dr. Prins, who has devoted her life’s work to research and advocacy. “The AUA is really growing its research portfolio,” she said.

“I’m involved in its research advocacy summit in Washington, DC five years running—with the goal to enhance research in urology. It’s important to remind Congress that funding for urologic research goes beyond the NIH, that there are a number of federal programs that contribute to urologic research, so we keep them aware of the advances we’re making and our continued needs.”

Dr. Prins added that among her activities on behalf of AUA is her attendance at its leadership forum, where she has worked with other AUA presidents, she noted. “We go from one NIH institute to the next and tell their leaders why it’s so important for them to have urologic research in their portfolios. And that advocacy has made such a difference in just a few years,” she said.

“When I received the [Distinguished Service] award at the SBUR last fall—I looked at everyone and said, ‘you all have to work for this field. If everybody works and contributes, a rising tide lifts all boats.’”
UI UROLOGY GRADS REFLECT ON THEIR RESIDENCIES, LOOK FORWARD

David Greenwald, MD and Laurel Sofer, MD, UI Urology Class of 2020, finished their residencies during the challenging months of COVID-19 and social distancing, but that did not affect their overall experience, both said. We spoke to both to get their thoughts on their years in the program and what they’ll be doing next.

For Dr. Greenwald, his UI Health experience was “fantastic. I have really learned and grown a lot as a person and as a physician, and covered the field of urology both broadly and deeply.” He appreciated the guidance and mentorship of faculty throughout his three years in the program. “With their guidance and mentorship, I feel like I have been well prepared to practice the most cutting-edge aspects of urology,” he said.

Dr. Greenwald also credited the “close-knit group residents” with whom he served, noting that the “supportive culture” created in the Department, especially among the residents, “kept me going” during the challenging residency. “The culture really enables each resident to grow and maintain his or her uniqueness,” adding to the closeness of residents’ working relationships, he added.

“It's not a program that produces cookie-cutter graduates, but prides itself on how each graduate follows his or her passion.”

While he has many memories that will endure, Dr. Greenwald noted that “being someone’s physician—being there through the whole [care] process—is really what I'm going to take with me.” He added that his experience in the program shed light on what it means to provide “top-quality patient care [by] a physician who is there for patients.”

The sense of responsibility for patients evolved over his residency. “Midway through my training I found myself managing and handling patient scenarios with more confidence and independence,” Dr. Greenwald said.

“It was monumental when I found myself using my senior residents and attendings more as a ‘safety net’ than previously when I relied on their help for essentially everything. I felt like I had finally become a real doctor.”

For his next step, Dr. Greenwald won’t have to go far. He’ll be doing a fellowship in Endourology at the University of Chicago.

“I am very excited to continue my training in this subspecialty and reach my goal of becoming an expert and leader in my field. Thanks to a great residency experience I feel more than prepared for this new challenge!” he said.

For Dr. Sofer, the experience at UI Urology was also highly rewarding. “The experience really validated my decision to join this incredible field,” she said.

“The physicians within the field and in particular within our residency are so happy to be in the field and to impart their wisdom upon us. I was so pleased with the variety of surgical experience our residency provided…and I developed leadership skills and a sense of confidence I didn’t know I would have.”

Dr. Sofer witnessed her own growth and maturity during her time in the program. “The most rewarding aspect was being able to teach the other residents what I learned over then to see in the final months how much they have progressed and use the tips I gave them in the operating room and in clinical management,” she said.

Her residency experience coincided with significant life experiences, including becoming a mother during residency. “Developing a work-life balance and incorporating being a mother into my working life were extremely challenging but so rewarding at the same time.”

“I would never have been able to create a family during residency if it wasn’t for the unwavering support of my attendings, my co-residents, my family and especially my husband, Jonatan.”
A memorable moment for her came early in her third year of training, just after her return from maternity leave, when a patient experienced a poor outcome. “That was the moment I realized I needed to be able to find a balance between taking care of my children and taking care of my patients,” she said.

“From that moment on, I became more vigilant, more detail oriented, harder working than ever and decided I would not let my family life be a detriment to my career, but be able to find a work-life balance and show my children that you can have a career and a family. “

Like Dr. Greenwald, she came to see her colleagues as family, from all-night trauma cases during her rotation at Mt. Sinai Hospital to shared happy hours and Thanksgiving dinners.

Dr. Sofer will be moving to Coral Springs, FL, where she’ll going a private practice group as a general urologist.

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