From E.R. to E.D.
The Michigan Medical School Gets Its First New Department in 15 years
With his appointment as dean of the University of Michigan Medical School on May 1, 1999, Allen Lichter, M.D. has become part of a long legacy of distinguished leadership. The Medical School has been indebted to the guidance and vision of its deans since its modest beginnings, through a period of influential and innovative reforms around the turn of the century, to the present day when the school enjoys renowned medical facilities and research programs.

During the first 40 years of medical education at Michigan, the top administrative posts were filled on a rotating basis. A president and secretary were elected by fellow faculty members each year. The president was not formally called "dean" for the first few years, but from the start his position was equivalent in rank, if not duties, to that of today’s dean. His stature, though, was somewhat diluted by the many other tasks he had to perform: the president and secretary shared administrative chores such as bookkeeping and registration, and had all the responsibilities of regular faculty members as well.

Their workload was often overwhelming, as illustrated by an undated faculty resolution inserted loose in the pages of the faculty minutes for 1865. It stated that the duties of officers had become “very burdensome” because of the large classes, keeping of accounts, registration, seating, cataloguing of students, and preparing of announcements. At that time the Board of Regents were asked to change the bylaw relating to the offices of dean and secretary by consolidating them into the office of dean alone, who would then be paid a reasonable compensation for his services. This request was granted, and a later revision of the bylaws in 1880 allowed the dean to appoint professors’ assistants as secretaries.

The first president/dean during this early period of rotating leadership was Abram Sager. Sager had come to the University of Michigan in 1842 for an unsalaried position teaching botany and zoology. His position became a regular appointment in 1847, but being a medical doctor, he was eager to establish a formal medical department at the University. Related to the economic struggles the state of Michigan faced at this time, the University itself was in a humble state, striving to exist despite financial problems. The Regents thus had difficulty mobilizing the 1837 University Act to found a Medical Department. Regent and physician Zina Pitcher encouraged Sager, along with Silas Douglas and
others, to address the Board of Regents concerning this matter. In 1847 they did just that, pointing out that at least 70 Michigan residents had been forced to leave the state for a medical education. Sager’s efforts helped facilitate the Regents’ 1848 decision to establish the Department. Sager’s subsequent appointment as professor of theory and practice of medicine is regarded as one of the founding acts of the Medical School.

Besides being instrumental in the formation of the Medical Department, Sager influenced medicine at Michigan with his enthusiasm for natural science. He graduated from Castleton Medical College in 1835 with familiarity in botany, zoology and geology. From 1837-40, he was chief in charge of the Botanical and Zoological Department in the Michigan State Geological Survey. As a teacher, he is said to have come to class with a frog in his pocket, insects fastened to his hat, and a snake that managed to escape into the classroom! His vast collection of 1,200 species and 12,000 specimens helped found the University’s Herbarium, and Sager’s ardent interest in natural science helped forge an important bridge between basic and applied sciences in medical education at Michigan.

Sager’s clinical expertise also contributed to the University’s Medical Department. He practiced in Detroit and then Jackson, performing what was probably the first Cesarean section in Michigan in 1869. He was a modest man, said to have a kindly manner with the sick. After his initial appointment at the University of Michigan, Sager became professor of obstetrics in 1850 and the chair of diseases of women and children from 1854-1860. He served as dean from 1850-1851, 1859-1861, and 1868-1875, retiring in 1875 after thirty-three years of service at the University. His resignation was in part due to the formation of the Homeopathic Department, which he strongly opposed. Corydon Ford, a colleague for many years, said “Doctor Sager’s wealth of learning and wide medical scholarship and his eminent service in his department of instruction did much to give character to the institution and to qualify many to do work which has largely blessed humanity and reflected honor upon his alma mater” (Ford, Corydon L. “Memorial Address on Alonzo Benjamin Palmer.” Physician and Surgeon 10 (1888): 245-253, 297-302, 355-360). Abram Sager’s legacy to the Medical School is not only in his service as the first dean, but also the example he set as a fine physician and major proponent of the school’s establishment.

Following Sager, Samuel Denton served as dean from 1851-1853, and again from 1857-1858. Denton earned his medical degree in 1825 at Castleton Medical College in Vermont. He was a successful physician, and his dedication to his patients is evident in the following advertisement posted in the Michigan State Journal in 1835:

[Dr. Denton] has removed his office to the Court House, in the South Room on the East side of the Hall. Those who call after bedtime will please knock at the window if the door is fastened.

Denton was influential with the Board of Regents, of which he was one of the inaugural members in 1837. He was politically active, serving as a senator in the Michigan legislature from 1845-48. Denton had been trained by Zina Pitcher, and became the professor of physics in the University of Michigan Medical Department when it opened in 1850. His rich professional experience and medical training were an asset in the Medical School’s formative years. Corydon Ford wrote that he “bore an honorable part in shaping the policy and giving reputation to the school which was destined to soon create, by its success, so rapidly rising to fame, no little sensation in the medical world” (Ford, Corydon L. “Memorial Address on Alonzo Benjamin Palmer.” Physician and Surgeon 10 (1888): 245-253, 297-302, 355-360).

The third dean elected was Silas H. Douglas, serving from 1852-57, and later from 1862-68. Douglas had moved to Michigan from his home state of New York in 1838, and began to study medicine in the office of Regent Pitcher. He also worked as a physician under another regent, the renowned Native American scholar Henry R. Schoolcraft. Douglas was eager to learn about medicine, writing that “Our profession is one of a progressive character, and it requires all our energies to keep pace with its advancement” (Silas Douglas to Helen Welles, 24 July 1843, Douglas 1, MHC, excerpt in The Origins of Michigan’s Leadership in the Health Sciences by William Hubbard, Jr. and Nicholas H. Steneck, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1995). In 1842 he finished his medical studies at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. He moved to Ann Arbor in 1843 to practice medicine, and his enthusiasm about the field fueled contributions to the creation of a medical department at Michigan.
In 1847, Douglas signed, along with Abram Sager, the “memorial” written to the Regents requesting a Medical Department. He, Sager and Zina Pitcher represented the first generation of scientists at the University of Michigan. Douglas came to the University of Michigan in 1844 to be an assistant in chemistry without salary. Eventually uncomfortable with this arrangement, he explained to his mentor Pitcher in 1846 that he was dissatisfied spending so much time teaching chemistry without compensation or a regular appointment. To ensure that Douglas would stay, Pitcher saw to it that he became professor of chemistry, mineralogy, and geology in the Department of Literature, Science & Arts. Also in 1846, Douglas became superintendent of university buildings and grounds, overseeing the construction of several prominent buildings on campus.

In 1848, Douglas was appointed to teach pharmacy and toxicology as one of the first two faculty members in the new Medical Department. Though his official title was professor of materia medica, he kept a small lab in the medical building and gave chemical demonstrations before class. This was not uncommon, as many professors at this time did not necessarily teach in their named disciplines. They often taught extra fields, and were very knowledgeable about the natural sciences and basic chemistry. Douglas persuaded the regents to allocate money for a chemical laboratory, which was built in 1855-1856. Since the lab was founded by Douglas, it was considered part of the Medical Department. The building’s construction was a triumph, since it was the first university building in the country built solely for chemistry. Douglas’ greatest legacy to the University was his work in chemistry. He published “Tables for Qualitative Chemical Analysis” (1864) with Professor Albert B. Prescott, and “Qualitative Chemical Analysis: a Guide in the Practical Study of Chemistry” (1874).

Douglas’ service at the University ended in 1877, under unfortunate circumstances. A discrepancy in the accounts of the chemical laboratory was discovered in 1875, and Assistant Professor Preston Rose was accused of taking more money from students than he gave to Silas Douglas, his supervisor. Rose shifted the blame onto Douglas, and the affair became public and highly controversial. The scandal was taken before the regents, and eventually both Rose and Douglas were dismissed. Although the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in Douglas’ favor when he contested the regents’ verdict, he was not reappointed at the University.

In-between Douglas’ two sessions as dean, Moses Gunn was elected dean for the 1858-1859 academic year. Gunn was born in New York in 1822, and in 1844 he attended the Geneva Medical College in New York. There he was mentored by Professor of Anatomy Corydon L. Ford, who eventually succeeded him as dean at Michigan. Ford remained at Geneva to teach, but the ambitious young Gunn left for Ann Arbor after graduating in 1846. Just prior to his departure, Geneva College received a cadaver, an unclaimed body from the Auburn State Prison. Since it arrived too late to be used in class, the body was given to Gunn for teaching purposes. He brought the cadaver with him to Ann Arbor and performed a dissection in front of guests. This was the first such demonstration in Ann Arbor, and possibly all of Michigan. His series of lectures were so well attended and successful that in the fall of 1846 Gunn taught anatomy at a private medical school in Ann Arbor. Gunn and Silas Douglas started the school while waiting for a Medical Department to be created at the University of Michigan.

After the regents made their decision to found the Medical Department, Gunn was appointed as the third faculty member at the University of Michigan. At Pitcher’s recommendation, he was made professor of anatomy and surgery in 1849 at age 27. Gunn’s research at Michigan included an investigation of which particular tissues cause hip and shoulder joint dislocations. He worked on a method of guiding these dislocated parts back into position by gently directing the bone back through its course of escape from the socket. Gunn’s results were published in the Peninsular Medical Journal.

Though Gunn initiated a tradition of excellent anatomy instruction at Michigan, he was also interested in surgery. A capable, determined man, Gunn became professor of surgery in 1854, holding the title until 1867, when it was taken over by his long time friend and colleague Corydon Ford. Gunn served as a surgeon for
The University of Michigan in 1854, he was appointed to the chair of anatomy at the University of Michigan. Before assuming this position, Dr. A.B. Brown of Niagara County, New York, had been teaching medicine in the office of Abram Sager. Following Abram Sager’s retirement, Alonzo Palmer was dean in 1861, and returned to the post from 1879-1880 and 1887-1891. Palmer did all he could to exert an actively compelling influence over them. [Nancrede, C.B.G. de. “Moses Gunn, A.M., M.D., LL.D.” Michigan Alumnus 12 (1905-06): 364-374].

Gunn's friendship with Corydon L. Ford proved to be an asset for the University. Like Gunn, Ford earned such respect and distinction in the Department that he was elected dean in 1861, and continued to the post from 1879-1880 and 1887-1891. Ford earned his M.D. from the Geneva Medical College in 1842, where he then taught anatomy from 1842-1848. He came from a family of farmers, but paralysis of one leg as a child made it impossible for him to pursue this vocation.

Ford was greatly respected and admired by his students and colleagues. By the time he was appointed to the chair of anatomy at the University of Michigan in 1854, he was known as an excellent teacher at several institutions. He was described as “an eloquent teacher, able to infuse life within dry bones.” Considered a great lecturer and demonstrator, he was one of the students’ favorite teachers. He had a high skill in dissecting, an ability to make a clear and concise presentation of the material, and an enthusiastic demeanor. Dr. William Mayo, a Michigan alumnus and student of Dr. Ford, said

By his forceful personality and his intense love of his subject he made the too often dull study of general anatomy as interesting as a novel. Contrary to custom, Ford preferred to make his own dissections while he talked, and he did them beautifully and rapidly. When he had finished one he would swivel the table around toward the class with a flourish, pointing upward with his cane to emphasize his words, “Now gentlemen, forget that—if you can.” (Clapsaddle, Helen: “The Doctors Mayo,” Atlantic Monthly 68:645-47, 1914)

Aside from teaching, Ford wrote several significant works including “Questions on Anatomy, Histology, and Physiology, for the Use of Students” (last ed. Ann Arbor, 1878), “Syllabus of Lectures on Odontology, Human and Comparative (1884), and “Questions on the Structure and Development of the Human Teeth” (1885). Dr. Ford was given a LL.D. from Michigan in 1881.

After giving his last lecture in 1894, he turned wearily to an assistant and said, “My work is done.” He collapsed on his way home, and died the next morning.

The sixth faculty member elected dean during this early period of rotating deanships was Alonzo Palmer. Following Abram Sager’s retirement, Alonzo Palmer was dean from 1875-1879, and then from 1880-1887. Palmer was recruited by Michigan in 1852 as professor of anatomy. However, since there were limited funds for faculty, Moses Gunn continued to teach both anatomy and surgery. Two years later Palmer’s appointment became more active when he took Abram Sager’s place as the professor of materia medica and diseases of women and children. In 1860, Palmer became professor of pathology and practice of medicine. Like Sager, Palmer advocated the blend of basic science with clinical practice in medical education at Michigan. Palmer did all he could in the best interest of his students, and was a loved and respected teacher. He enjoyed giving lectures, and prepared as many as 196 in one year, half of which were new. This was nearly double the workload of the average faculty member.

Prior to his teaching career, Alonzo Palmer had become distinguished as a practicing physician and administrator. He graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York in 1839. He opened a practice in Tecumseh, southwest of Ann Arbor, and kept a general practice for 10 years. Palmer was city physician in Chicago during the 1852 outbreak of cholera among northern European immigrants. There he was head of the cholera hospital, where 1,500 patients were treated that year. Palmer received wide recognition for his services in Chicago, and one of his principal works, “A Treatise on the Epidemic of Cholera” (Ann Arbor, 1885), drew on his experience there.

In addition, Alonzo Palmer made numerous other contributions to the field of medicine. From 1852-59, he edited The Peninsular Journal of Medicine, and from 1872-73 he was president of the Michigan Medical Society. He served for six months as a regional surgeon in the 2nd Michigan Regiment of Infantry during the Civil War, and is said to have dressed the first wound inflicted by the enemy at Blackburn’s Ford on July 18, 1861. During the war, he was president of the American Medical Association. He published “Homeopathy, What Is It? A Statement and Review of Its Doctrines & Practice” (Detroit, 1880), in accordance with his general critique of homeopathy. In 1886 Palmer published The Temperance Teachings of Science, which examined the effects of alcohol and narcotics on the body. Palmer advocated temperance, and his book circulated widely, in part due to its promotion by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Alonzo Palmer’s teaching and writing had a strong influence on the almost 10,000 students he taught. He received a LL.D. from Michigan in 1881, and died in 1887. Corydon Ford wrote of his colleague that “His cheerful and encouraging manner was often more than medicine, it was courage, it was hope, it was mental stimulus, it was an uplifting influence, leaving sunshine for darkness, cheerfulness for despair” (Ford, Corydon L. “Memorial Address on Alonzo Benjamin Palmer.” Physician and Surgeon 10 (1888): 245-253, 297-302, 355-360).

After the end of Palmer’s service as dean in 1887, Corydon Ford was the last dean to be elected. He served until 1891. Although the faculty had for more than 40 years elected deans of the Medical Department, the concomitant growth of the University led to the decision that the selection of deans ought to be centralized. Beginning in 1891, with the tenure of Victor Vaughan, deans were appointed by the president and the board of regents of the University. The history of this new era of leadership at the Medical School will be highlighted in the next issue of Medicine at Michigan.