Hello,

With online learning, virtual student and resident recruitment, and a new COVID-19 Center of Excellence, your McGovern Medical School at UTHealth continues to navigate and lead as we reimagining and restructure our daily activities to provide a safe and productive environment.

Diversified Search is leading the national search for the permanent dean of McGovern Medical School with a search committee co-chaired by Michael R. Blackburn, PhD, dean of MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, UTHealth executive vice president and chief academic office; and Eric Boerwinkle, PhD, dean of UTHealth School of Public Health.

Greetings from

UNTIL A PERMANENT DEAN IS NAMED, I HAVE ESTABLISHED A SET OF PRIORITIES:

CREATE MORE STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS. McGovern Medical School loses qualified students due to its lack of scholarships. Yes, we have amazing students, but without scholarship dollars, it is an unleveled playing field. I know that through the generosity of our alumni and friends, we can do better.

FILL VACANT DEPARTMENT CHAIRS WITH STRONG LEADERS. Over the summer when I was appointed dean ad interim, we had three vacant department chair positions—in the Department of Ophthalmology, the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, and the Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery. I am pleased to report that Anthony Estrera, MD, will be our permanent chair of the Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery. National searches continue for the other two departments.

STREAMLINE FACULTY HIRING. Whether recruiting for a position in the lab, in the classroom, or at one of our teaching hospitals, we must create a hiring process that brings in the right person to the right job in an efficient manner. This will benefit our students, our research, and our patients.

ELIMINATE SILOS. Working with UTHealth President Giuseppe N. Colasurdo, MD, we are streamlining some of our clinical offerings to provide a more comprehensive program. These larger restructured programs will help in our recruitment and retention efforts as well as better position us for attracting grants and multi-center clinical trials.

I hope you share my enthusiasm for this opportunity and time of transition.

Please join us in making McGovern Medical School the best medical school it can be.

Richard J. Andrassy
Executive Dean & Interim, McGovern Medical School
Leaving the familiar behind, Brian Tseng, MD, PhD ’98, and his newlywed wife, Cindy, journeyed from California to Houston in the 1990s for a new opportunity. Soon, Brian would begin the MD/PhD program offered jointly through McGovern Medical School at UTHealth and MD Anderson UTHealth Graduate School.

New to Texas, the young couple was especially grateful to be met by the kindness and compassion of Ian Butler, MD, and Patricia Butler, MD, both professors at McGovern Medical School. The Butlers not only invested in Brian professionally—offering mentorship, training, and guidance—but they also welcomed him and his wife into their lives personally, inviting them to family dinners and holiday celebrations.

Brian now works in Massachusetts, where his unique education as a physician-scientist and board-certified pediatric neurologist led to a career in translational medicine. Using the skills he learned at UTHealth, he helps bring new pediatric drugs—including gene therapy—to clinics and hospitals.

To express their gratitude and honor the Butlers’ unwavering commitment to medical students for more than 30 years, the Tsengs established the Drs. Patricia and Ian Butler Endowed Scholarship to help students pursuing careers in pediatrics.

“I wanted to make a gift to recognize the Butlers and all that they’ve done for McGovern Medical School,” Brian Tseng, MD, PhD ’98

“I think that our gift can be doubled to me that’s a no-brainer,” Brian says.

Brian is grateful to be able to support McGovern Medical School and hopes he and his wife serve as an inspiration for other alumni, just like Mimi Cho-Rohlfsen did for him, especially if alumni are able to take advantage of matching opportunities.

“If other alumni find themselves at a time when they can give back, I would encourage them to think about their alma mater and where they became a doctor,” he says.

Brian’s introduction to philanthropy began at a recent reunion. At the reunion, he spoke with classmate and UTHealth alumna Mimi Cho-Rohlfsen, MD, PhD ’00, and learned she had established an endowment in honor of leadership in the MD/PhD program at UTHealth for the benefit of students pursuing careers as physician-scientists. Brian says Mimi not only generously sparked his own giving journey, motivating him not only to start the endowment in honor of the Butlers but also to support the MD/PhD endowment she had began. Brian’s generosity will have an instrumental impact on future medical leaders—and it will have twice the impact it would otherwise thanks to UTHealth Champions, a program exclusively for friends and family of UTHealth, including alumni. Through UTHealth Champions, a university matches qualified endowed gifts between $100,000 and $1,000,000 at a 1-to-1 ratio, and 2024 or funds run out.

He also took advantage of an employer matching opportunity, another way donors may be able to significantly maximize their gifts. To find out if your employer matches gifts and use the search feature to search for your company.

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Bringing together expertise and access to the best clinical care, research trials, discovery science, and public health knowledge, we have established the UTHealth COVID-19 Center of Excellence. The center includes the first post-COVID-19 clinic in Houston at UT Physicians, the clinical practice of McGovern Medical School at UTHealth, which is dedicated to helping adults and children of all ages fight the long-term impacts of the virus. The center includes specialists in cardiology, general medicine, infectious disease, neurology, pulmonology, psychiatry, and otorhinolaryngology. Telehealth and in-person visits are both available.

New funding includes an $8 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to investigate whether certain mitochondrial proteins influence the progression of COVID-19 in mice. A novel model of COVID-19 in mice is evaluating toll-like receptor 9 and the role of the immune system in controlling the virus. The model is being used to evaluate the impact of manipulating the immune system to help prevent the progression of COVID-19 in patients. In a new study, researchers are exploring the combination of therapies to prevent the progression of COVID-19 in one of the deadliest subsets of the virus. Trials such as these are going to help patients treated by UTHealth experts.

Leaders at UTHealth School of Public Health continue to gather local and state officials on best practices for minimizing the spread. Researchers at Cizik School of Public Health are studying the socioeconomic and mental health effects of the virus on Hispanics, while members of MD Anderson UTHealth Graduate School are exploring how the time of day a medication is taken could help a COVID-19 patient. And experts at UTHealth School of Biomedical Informatics are using big data in the fight against COVID-19.

“Within our six schools, we have the broad expertise that has positioned us as one of the few universities to help our community, Texas, and the country through the pandemic and beyond,” said Michael R. Woods, PhD, executive vice president and chief academic officer of UTHealth and the William S. Kilroy, Sr. Distinguished Chairman of UT Physicians. “That team, with amazing clinical care, COVID-19 trials, real-time translational research, and expert knowledge from our public health leaders, is exploring projects at the new center run the gamut from a COVID-19 testing program for corporations to key data on how the virus is impacting the most vulnerable populations.”

The UT Physicians post-COVID-19 adult and pediatric clinic includes specialists in cardiology, general medicine, infectious disease, pulmonology, psychiatry, and otorhinolaryngology. Telehealth and in-person visits are both available.

The future of the Center of Excellence includes the advancement of reliable testing for the virus, validating effective therapies, and using big data analytics and artificial intelligence to enhance care and research efforts. Researchers are also exploring how the virus will continue to impact the health care system in the future and will contribute to the long-term impacts of the disease.
The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a new “normal” for people around the world. With travel restrictions and communities closing down, people are having to adjust to a new lifestyle, often using technology to ease that transition.

Face-to-face meetings at businesses have become videoconferences through software such as Cisco Webex and Zoom, and students, from primary school through graduate education, have begun learning through virtual classrooms. The changes to everyday life have extended into the field of health care as well. With an increased importance on keeping medical professionals safe, many in-person and elective doctors’ appointments and surgeries have been canceled, placing a strain on primary care services, health professionals have begun seeing 50% more patients via telehealth than prior to the pandemic.

"I’ve been busier than ever," she continued. "A lot of people who normally wouldn’t come in and take an appointment with a mental health professional or psychiatrist have come in now due to all the direct and indirect fallout on their mental health."

Because of the pandemic, she has been able to extend the services she offers to her patients in the UAE to all of her patients both locally and statewide.

Rasheed said that the transition for her patients to telemedicine has been very smooth, because with most patients and psychiatrists, person-to-person contact is not necessary. Where she saw the most improvement were in appointments for their appointments.

"Patients could be in the car, or they could be at home, or they could be wherever and still make it to the appointment," she said. "I help our patients out because there is a cost savings of not having to drive and not having to take time off from work or school. Telemedicine has been a big help in mental health care overall." Contrary to Rasheed’s position in psychiatry, for John Cangelosi, MD ’05, and founder of Sagis, a physician-led, especially pathology laboratory specializing in dermatopathology, the COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendously negative impact on his practice.

"Telemedicine has been absolutely crucial," said Shama Rasheed, MD ‘99, and founder of Sagis, a physician-led, especially pathology laboratory specializing in dermatopathology, the COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendously negative impact on his practice.

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"I’ve been busier than ever," she continued. "A lot of people who normally wouldn’t come in and take an appointment with a mental health professional or psychiatrist have come in now due to all the direct and indirect fallout on their mental health." A longtime proponent of telemedicine, Rasheed has been practicing online since 2010, when she was a dermatologist. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, she has begun hosting virtual “happy hours” where she offers to her patients in the UAE to all of her patients through the roof, and a lot of people who were teetering over them Zoom meetings.

"The future is bright," Cangelosi said. "It’s just the fact that right now, there is still a certain discomfort looking at things virtually and on a computer monitor."

In the future, long after the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided, Shelley Rosen said participation with telemedicine will be in good hands.

"I think that young people are used to technology and as much of their communication, even their personal relationships, are on social media," Cangelosi added. "It’s something they’re very comfortable with, and maybe they have been able to do things that we haven’t been able to do in the past, 20 years, a thing or two."

Although telemedicine was not an option for patients in his practice, Cangelosi was able to utilize the technology in other ways.

"Telemedicine has played a more of a role in education for us," Cangelosi said. Cangelosi has said participation with telemedicine has “caught on like wildfire.” With being able to interact in real-time online as well as keep in contact through email and social media, the lab has seen over 200 students attend their weekly Dermatopathology courses from all over the world. While both Rasheed and Cangelosi are excited about the implementation and sudden growth of telemedicine, they each agree there is room for improvement for physicians and patients. For instance, while telemedicine is convenient for patients who would otherwise be traveling from long distances, many patients in rural areas may not have access to the high-speed internet required for the calls.

"For physicians, since the technology is so new, many have not had the training required for telemedicine and may face a learning curve with the new technology.

"It’s something they’re very comfortable with, and maybe they have been able to do things that we haven’t been able to do in the past, 20 years, a thing or two."
There were some questions as to how detrimental COVID-19 would be to our clinical education, but our expectations have been surpassed. Due to the pandemic, we have learned ranks and face shields. We are not permitted to examine patients with COVID-19 pre-existing medical issues during these times, but we discuss them with the team regardless.

While we have yet to see COVID-19 or suspected COVID-19 patients, we feel confident that our education has not been sacrificed. Groups do not congregate to eat meals, lectures are online, and numerous other modifications have been made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but nevertheless, our understanding is still established and teams are adapting to the situation. We are consistently learning and gaining experience from the patients we do see and from the faculty we work with. Most rotations have been incredible, and we are thankful for what is to be working in a hospital during this time.

Going through the third-year clerkships has been especially difficult this year with the pandemic. However, it has also made me appreciate the good things in life more.

My hometown is in San Antonio, but I received my undergraduate degree in biology and global health from Duke University in North Carolina. While I loved the four years out of state and learned a tremendous amount, I am a Texan at heart and therefore decided to come back to Texas to pursue my medical education. For me, there was no better place than McGovern Medical School in the largest medical complex in the nation, to complete my medical training. Going through the third-year clerkships has been especially difficult this year with the pandemic. However, it has also made me appreciate the good things in life more.

As of right now, I have completed my pediatrics, internal medicine, and surgery rotations, all of which have truly taught me a great deal of information. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has affected these rotations with low patient volumes, virtual rounds, and restrictions toward patients with respiratory issues. As a fun fact about me is that I have played soccer my entire life, including competitively as a teenager and recreationally in college and medical school. I love every aspect of the sport and am always trying to find time to work out with my friends.

Growing up, I lived in multiple cities because my father was a surgeon for the U.S. Army. However, I consider El Paso, Texas, my home. I enrolled in biology at The University of Texas at Austin, and decided to move to Houston for medical school: I am passionate about medicine for residents, and so far, plastic surgery has piqued my interest the most. I am currently a third-year medical student on my neurology rotation. This third year has been more fun than I could have imagined. Having the entire hospital at my disposal to get to deliver babies or long night shifts. I have loved this year; however, I have been fortunate so far. I am currently a third-year medical student on my neurology rotation. The third year has been more fun than I could have imagined. Having the entire hospital at my disposal to get hands-on training, but a great amount of our didactic studies have been moved to the online format. My post-colonies has given me plenty of opportunities. I often think of as my comrade in the trenches. We go through all the good and bad times together, and that makes an incredibly special bond. After all, I am enjoying my time on clinical rotations and now we are set to graduate in less than two years.

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Four distinguished scholars who demonstrate a longstanding excellence in the areas of teaching, research, and clinical care have received the top honor awarded by UTHealth President Giuseppe N. Colasurdo.

Each award, given to deserving individuals nominated by their peers, carries with it the honorary title of President’s Scholar.

Historically, recipients have been honored during a luncheon in the spring to recognize outstanding achievements, but this year, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of the event.

“These four distinguished individuals have contributed greatly to the university’s mission to advance research, offer the best in patient care, and educate the health care leaders of tomorrow,” Colasurdo said.

Kevin A. Morano, PhD, associate vice president for Faculty Affairs and Development, the Roger J. Berger, MD, Distinguished Professor at UTHealth, and Distinguished Teaching Professor of The University of Texas System (UT System), congratulated the recipients.

“The selection criteria for the awards are rigorous, requiring evidence of innovation, recognition, and exemplary service to faculty, students, and patients, while working to elevate the stature of UTHealth among our peers in Texas, the nation, and across the world,” Morano said.

The awards acknowledge contributions of outstanding scholars and emphasize the fundamental importance of research, teaching, and clinical excellence to the mission of UTHealth.

We congratulate them on being among the select few who are President’s Scholars, and we thank them for their service, leadership, and commitment.”

Giuseppe N. Colasurdo, MD
UTHealth President

Kevin A. Morano, PhD
Associate vice president for Faculty Affairs and Development

Faith Harper
Office of Public Affairs, UTHealth

Congratulations to the 2019 President’s Scholars!

Award in Research
Monica E. Myers, MD, PhD

Award in Teaching
Patricia M. Butler, MD

Award in Clinical Service
Bela Patel, MD

Award in Teaching
Belinda M. Reininger, DrPH

Award in Clinical Service
Bela Patel, MD

Award in Teaching
Belinda M. Reininger, DrPH

What is your fondest memory of your time at McGovern Medical School?
I have three memories that come to mind. For starters, Third-year rotations with my amazing 2004 classmates. Also, scrubbing in with Dr. Red Duke.

What are your hopes for today’s McGovern Medical School students?
I hope they realize the gravity of carrying other people’s stories and also their ability to make a difference one patient at a time.

What inspires you?
The creativity, innovation, and activism that have manifested during the pandemic.

Who is your mentor?
I haven’t had one specific mentor, but have carried tidbits of teaching and knowledge from Dr. Philip Johnson, Dr. Octavio Pinell, Dr. Richard Andrassy, and Dr. Weinberger from Baylor Garland.

What’s a day on the job like?
All of my days are different, but are some combination of hospital rounds, meeting a patient in the ER, seeing someone at home, physicals at the office, lunch with my kids, attending board meetings, and working on my side hustle.

What skill is most vital to your job?
Communication. Listening well and speaking clearly and concisely.

What is on your music playlist?
U2, Tom Petty, Jon Batiste, Daft Punk, Lizzo, Whitney Houston, Imagine Dragons, Bill Withers, Vampire Weekend, Post Malone, Alicia Keys

What is the one thing you can’t live without? Why?
Coffee and laughter/connection with other people — both propel me through the day.

What has been your greatest adventure?
Study abroad experiences in India and Ireland, having children, opening my own practice, and trying a product launch during the pandemic.
In Memoriam

JAMES T. WILLERSON, MD

Remembered as a great cardiologist, researcher, mentor, collaborator, and friend, James T. Willerson, MD, 80, former chair of the Department of Internal Medicine and president of UTHSC, died Sept. 16, 2020.

Born in Lampasas, Texas, Willerson grew up in San Antonio and was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of The University of Texas at Austin. He graduated from Baylor College of Medicine, received a master's degree in molecular cardiology from Harvard Medical School, and completed his training in internal medicine and cardiology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

Willerson was the president emeritus, director of Cardiovascular Research, and professor of the College of Medicine at the University at Houston in the Texas Medical Center of South Texas Medical Center at the time of his death.

He served as: vice dean of the McGovern Medical School's Department of Internal Medicine and executive dean ad interim from 2017-18; chair of the Department of Internal Medicine and held the Edward Randall III professorship from 1989-2000. He was president of the American Heart Association and a member of the UTHSC Board of Trustees; the University of Texas at Austin; and several other health care organizations.

He was a member of the National Academy of Medicine. In 2005, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award presented at the 17th Annual Transcatheter Cardiovascular Therapeutics Scientific Symposium on behalf of the Cardiovascular Research Foundation in New York City. In 2006, he received the Libin Award in cardiovascular research for professional publications, he published more than 1,200 scientific articles and co-authored 25 textbooks, including his signature textbook, the Third Edition of Cardiovascular Medicine. With a clinical practice of more than 3,000, he continued to see patients daily and entirely before his death.

Willerson's numerous accolades and awards included the Distinction Alumni Award of Baylor College of Medicine in 1988 and the Distinguished Alumni Award of UTHSC in 1994. He led an association dedicated to research buildings and recruit many outstanding students.

"James T. Willerson, MD, an old country doctor. He was at the hospital at all hours of the day and night. I don't know when, and if, he ever slept."

Richard Armstrong, MD
McGovern Medical School
Residence Hall at Texas Medical Center

UPDATE YOUR INFO

VOLUNTEER

Send in your Class Notes!

Let us know what is happening with you and find out what your classmates have accomplished. Please submit your update at go.uth.edu/ClassNotes regarding your personal and professional accomplishments for our “Class Notes” section of UTHSC News.

To log in or fill out and return the attached self-mailing form. If so, please take a moment to update your contact information at www.uth.edu/index/alumni-form.htm.

For UTHSC alumni, your alumni status is your passport to access numerous opportunities for networking, learning, and growing your career. Find the right opportunity for you at med.uth.edu/alumni.

Our alumni are a great asset to the McGovern Medical School community. We have numerous opportunities that allow you to share your knowledge, create meaningful relationships, and give your expertise. Find the right opportunity for you at med.uth.edu/alumni.

In Memoriam

James T. Willerson, MD

Remembered as a great cardiologist, researcher, mentor, collaborator, and friend, James T. Willerson, MD, 80, former chair of the Department of Internal Medicine and president of UTHSC, died Sept. 16, 2020. Willerson’s numerous accolades and awards included the Distinction Alumni Award of Baylor College of Medicine in 1988 and the Distinguished Alumni Award of UTHSC in 1994. He led an association dedicated to research buildings and recruit many outstanding students.

"James T. Willerson was a true giant in American cardiology, yet he considered himself an old country doctor. He was at the hospital at all hours of the day and night. I don’t know when, and if, he ever slept."

Richard Armstrong, MD
McGovern Medical School
Residence Hall at Texas Medical Center