



Dedication to Malcolm Ecker

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We are honored to dedicate the 27th volume of The University of Pennsylvania Orthopaedic Journal to Dr. Malcolm L. Ecker who has touched the lives of many generations of Penn Orthopaedic graduates, in addition to the many pediatric and adult patients he has served.

Dr. Ecker states, “My best advice is to be curious in life,” and both his career and family life exemplify this sentiment. Originally from Philadelphia, Dr. Ecker proceeded to Temple University for his undergraduate studies in physics, and then onto Temple University School of Medicine graduating in 1961. He then completed his rotating internship at Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, where he did everything from reducing fractures, to caring for medical patients, to delivering babies. He subsequently moved to Boston to become a junior assistant resident in surgery at Boston City Hospital. During this time, Dr. Ecker spent time practicing as a general surgeon at the only hospital with an ambulance, and thus was forced to rapidly hone his surgical skills. During this era, surgical residents had very little help. Dr. Ecker and his co-residents were responsible for obtaining their own blood samples and looking at said samples under the microscope in addition to mixing the intravenous fluids for their patients, all while caring for upwards of 60 patients on the floor. During his early years of training, Dr. Ecker was expected to be a consummate physician.

The demanding environment of Boston City Hospital prepared Dr. Ecker for his next adventure: Plattsburg Air Force Base. The beginning of Dr. Ecker’s military service marked a challenging time for the military, at which time they were so desperate for military physicians that many doctors bypassed basic training. At only 25 years of age and following only 1 year of general surgery residency, Dr. Ecker was the only physician on a base of 18,000 people with surgical training for approximately 6 months. He recalls managing many orthopaedic injuries closed, learning how to do spinals from CRNAs, and performing surgeries without anesthesia or EKG monitoring. In two years, the young surgeon did approximately 400 cases with minimal help or supervision.

Dr. Ecker then went to The Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS) to complete his orthopaedic residency. HSS provided a nurturing learning environment, where the Chairman and Chief of Surgery at the time, Dr. Robert Lee Patterson, considered the job of teaching residents to be paramount. It

was at this stage that Dr. Ecker began to develop into the great surgical teacher we know today. Dr. Ecker acknowledges that teaching surgery is exceptionally challenging, and requires the teacher to, “be willing to sit and watch someone fumble.” Training at HSS inculcated the importance of a thorough knowledge of anatomy, evidence based discussion of cases and self-critique when examining patients at follow up.

Throughout Dr. Ecker’s practice, he has worked in both private practice and academic settings. His practice evolved to include pediatrics and adults, to pediatrics only, to focusing on spine and pioneering spinal cord monitoring, and so on. He states, “you always want to be open to things,” and in a field driven by innovation, this is an important tenet to keep in mind as residents while we learn seemingly impossible volumes of information, only to realize that in ten years our techniques and tools may look much different.

Given Dr. Ecker’s diverse training background and early experiences, it is no surprise that his career focused on taking care of the patient rather than just an isolated surgical problem. Dr. Ecker jokingly admits to not being “the best marketer,” but no one can argue that he is one of the best patient advocates. This is perhaps the most impressive and impactful way that Dr. Ecker influences the Penn residents. Practicing in a nonoperative capacity now, Dr. Ecker still influences the lives of his patients by listening to their problems and concerns and treating their maladies in the clinical setting. Additionally, he teaches all the residents who have the pleasure of working with him at the VA hospital and CHOP the importance of listening to the patient, focusing on a good exam, and providing the appropriate treatment—surgical or otherwise. He encourages trainees to derive satisfaction from what you can do for a patient—the unique ability to go to work and to fix something—rather than other material gains.

In addition to being an excellent surgeon and educator, Dr. Ecker is a proud husband and father of three children who are his greatest source of pride. Since retirement, he returned to Drexel to learn about computer programming—inspired by his granddaughter—and proved that he remains curious. He notes that his “life review has been positive,” and he exudes a humility and graciousness when discussing his journey and his accomplishments that demands respect and admiration. We are proud to dedicate this edition of the UPOJ to Dr. Ecker, who proves to be a significant role model as an innovative surgeon, a dedicated patient advocate, a comprehensive educator, and a well-rounded individual.