Compassion and Commitment

“A sense of shared humanity” motivates Dr. David Nichols.

By Philip Berroll

In the course of his career, David Nichols, M.D., has had no shortage of honors and acclaim. Still, upon hearing that he would receive Mount Sinai’s Saul Horowitz, Jr. Memorial Award, Dr. Nichols says he reacted with “a combination of tremendous thrill and total disbelief – because I did not expect to win.”

For all his modesty, it’s easy to see why Dr. Nichols, who is vice dean for education and professor of anesthesiology and critical care medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, was chosen for this honor.

The award was established in 1978 – the year after Dr. Nichols graduated from Mount Sinai School of Medicine – in memory of longtime trustee Saul Horowitz, Jr., who played a major role in the construction of the school’s facilities. It is given to alumni who have made “significant contributions as a teacher, investigator, and/or practitioner in the field of medicine.” By any definition, Dr. Nichols meets this standard.

A specialist in pediatric intensive care, Dr. Nichols has taught at Johns Hopkins for nearly three decades. He has served as director of Johns Hopkins Hospital’s Division of Pediatric Critical Care and its Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). Dr. Nichols has also trained and mentored more than 50 postdoctoral fellows, written more than 80 professional journal articles and abstracts and edited numerous textbooks on pediatric critical care medicine.

Dr. Nichols credits Mount Sinai with providing the foundation for his career. “It was a very supportive and engaging learning environment,” he says, “and it gave me a commitment to excellence. It also taught me the importance of putting the patient first.”

From Berlin to Baltimore

Dr. Nichols’ path to Mount Sinai took some unusual turns. Born in Virginia, he spent much of his childhood in Berlin, where his father, an English professor and Fulbright scholar, served as director of that city’s Freie University. After graduating from Yale with a degree in molecular biophysics and biochemistry, “I decided that I was ready for a somewhat bigger city than New Haven – and of course, nothing can compete with New York.”

It was while at Mount Sinai that Dr. Nichols chose to go into pediatrics. “I believe that it’s very important for a doctor to enjoy being around a given type of patient,” he says. “And I just loved being around children. I felt committed to and passionate about caring for them.”
That passion took Dr. Nichols even further: while doing his internship and residency at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, he decided to specialize in pediatric intensive care.

“There is a tremendous immediacy and energy in that situation,” he says. “All of your training, knowledge and expertise is focused on this one sick child, and you know that if you and your team can pull together to provide the right care, this child will have a chance at growing up. It's part of what makes medicine in general and pediatrics in particular such a noble profession.

“Most of the time,” he continues, “the children bounce back, and you're able to watch the joy, the gratitude and the relief on the faces of the family members. When it doesn't work out, and you have to convey bad news to a family and maybe even grieve with them – that's a moment that no parent would ever want to face. But it's also one that exposes our common humanity, the idea that we're all in this together. And I think it's that sense of a shared humanity that bonds doctors and patients and families.”

That same “sense of a shared humanity” spurred Dr. Nichols to join a major overseas initiative: last year, he was involved in setting up a medical school in the Malaysian city of Serdang. The facility, Perdana University Graduate School of Medicine, is a public-private partnership for which Johns Hopkins and Ireland’s Royal College of Surgeons are helping to provide courses. Dr. Nichols describes the experience as “a wonderful, exciting journey.”

“The Next Big Challenge”
At Johns Hopkins, Dr. Nichols has worked to provide students with the same high-quality education that he received at Mount Sinai. Under his leadership, the university undertook a major updating of its medical school curriculum.

While he considers American medical education to be “probably the best in the world,” Dr. Nichols sees room for improvement in several areas: a greater emphasis on recent scientific discoveries such as genome sequencing; more inter-professional education involving doctors, nurses and other healthcare personnel; and increased use of simulation technology.

The most crucial need, he feels, is for research into the link between physicians' education and training and patient outcomes. “We have to find a way to prove the assumption that a doctor who’s been well trained and educated will provide better care,” says Dr. Nichols, “and for poorly functioning teams, to determine what about the training and preparation of team members could have been done better.”

“That is the next big challenge in medicine,” he adds. “If there's any task that I would like to take on in the rest of my career, it's that one.”