

MARK ERLEBACHER, MD '79

The Art of Listening

For Mark Erlebacher, MD '79, the euphoria of medicine is in a successful diagnosis. Even after 45 years of practicing internal medicine, that satisfaction hasn't waned. "Anything can walk in the door," he says. "I like to solve the puzzle."

For Dr. Erlebacher, the key to diagnosis most often lies in the patient history. "A patient's visit should be 80 percent history and 20 percent exam," he says. "With a good history, you often know what's going on before the exam, just from listening to the patient."

It's a skill honed through years of practice, one that hasn't gone unnoticed. "Years ago, I had a medical student ask if he could come back during his week off to shadow again," Erlebacher shares. "He said, 'I just want to come and watch you tease out the history from your patients.'"

In addition to being a good listener, Erlebacher's guiding principle is, "the patient comes first," which he says is essentially treating others how he'd want to be treated himself.

That includes maintaining an active role in co-managing patients that he refers to specialists. "I communicate with specialists routinely to speak up on a patient's behalf," he says.

In his own practice, regardless of whether there's room in the schedule, patients who need to be seen get seen. That may result in longer waits for others, but those who've been fit in when they had an emergency become patients for life. (A Google search of Erlebacher reveals multiple thanks from family members for care received by loved ones in their obituaries.)

The son of Jewish German immigrants, Erlebacher grew up in Syracuse. He credits a Nottingham High School science teacher for recognizing his potential beyond his average grades. "I think she saw that I asked good questions and was good at processing information but perhaps not so great at memorization," he says.

With her encouragement, he buckled down on his studies, and also followed her suggestion to volunteer at University Hospital. He asked to be placed in the clinical pathology department, where he ended up working full time each summer through high school, and later, college, in the lab of John Bernard Henry, MD.



Mark Erlebacher, MD '79, is a longtime member of the Medical Alumni Foundation board of directors and clinical faculty member at Upstate.

While Erlebacher was in high school, Upstate's Max Mozell, PhD, launched a test program to see how top high school science students would perform taking medical school classes. Erlebacher was one of 11 students selected to take a renal physiology course alongside Upstate medical students. "We all passed," he says.

With his interest in medicine cemented, Erlebacher majored in biology at SUNY Buffalo, graduating in just over three years. When he applied to medical school at Upstate, Drs. Henry and Mozell wrote his recommendation letters.

His time in the pathology department had taught Erlebacher that working in a lab was not for him. "I get bored quickly," he says. "I like human interaction."

Wanting to be on the front line, he set his focus on internal medicine, doing several away rotations to gain different perspectives. One of those was a "bucket list experience" working with Dame Sheila Sherlock, MBBS, MD, a pre-eminent liver specialist at the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead Heath, outside London.

"She had been knighted by the Queen a year earlier," Erlebacher says. "She treated people from all over the world and I saw extremely rare conditions. I would work up her patients and present them to her."

Another elective was at the University of Miami, where Erlebacher would go on to complete an internal medicine residency. "It was one of the largest programs in the country and I wanted a program where I saw a lot," he says.

After completing his training, Erlebacher returned to Syracuse. After two years working for an HMO, he maintained a solo practice for 27 years, becoming part of a large internal medicine group in 2007, which was acquired by Crouse Hospital in 2010.

But Erlebacher likes variety. For 25 years, he was also medical director of the Jewish Home of Central New York, where he chose to be on call 24/7. He's done a variety of consulting, ranging from peer review and insurance work to serving as a medical malpractice expert witness (mostly defense) and media, hospital, and laboratory consulting. He's also served on multiple boards and committees, mostly related to local hospitals and medical organizations.

But his longest-running volunteer commitment has been to Upstate Medical University, where he serves as a volunteer clinical professor and was honored with the President's Award for Outstanding Faculty Service in 2006. He spent 14 years as a member of the College of Medicine admissions committee and is a longtime board member of the Medical Alumni Foundation, serving as president from 2000 to 2002.

"I really love what I do," says Erlebacher. "In appreciation for my profession, I give my time, both to help the school and to help students."

Erlebacher says he's very happy he chose internal medicine and is thankful to now be working for the love of the job. "I think anybody lucky and hardworking enough to go into medicine can adjust their lifestyle to the specialty they choose," he says. Erlebacher plans on working for at least two more years. "I love helping people and am grateful for the role I get to play in people's lives."

—Renée Gearhart Levy