

# Pediatric Ready

**From national policy making to local emergency rooms, Distinguished Alumna Mary Fallat, MD '79, has dedicated her career to advocating for children.**

**2024**  
Award Winner

Over her 40-year medical career, pediatric trauma surgeon Mary Fallat, MD '79, often noticed that children's interests were absent in medical system development, prompting her to expand her purview beyond individual patient care to the "big picture" of where children fit into the care paradigm and decision-making processes that impacted them. "I have an infinite amount of passion for making sure that children are included in any system of care," she says.

At present, she's focused on emergency department care, state trauma systems, and national preparedness. "My goal is to develop action and implementation plans to help address care for kids everywhere they live in our country," Dr. Fallat says.

That's a big task, but her track record speaks to her tenacity and commitment.

When she joined the University of Louisville as a pediatric surgeon in 1987, one of Fallat's first goals was to develop a trauma service for children at Kosair (now Norton) Children's Hospital. During her first year on the job, she wrote a strategic plan for a Trauma Services Program and presented it to the administration. The proposal was implemented, becoming the first dedicated pediatric trauma service in the state of Kentucky, and encompassed all aspects of emergency care: EMS, communications center, emergency helicopter service, emergency room care, and the deliberate comprehensive treatment for the injured. Fallat was named director of trauma services, a position she held until 2005.

Simultaneously, she developed a leadership

role in the American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma, leading the initiative in Kentucky that culminated in trauma system legislation.

During the 1990s, Fallat was asked to join a project examining children's emergency care in rural Appalachia, further piquing her interest in emergency medical services (EMS) and emergency department care for children.

"We only have two children's hospitals in Kentucky and many hospitals across the state don't admit children," she says. "Our goal was to ensure EMS and emergency departments are prepared to take care of children."

In 2001, Fallat was funded as principal investigator for the first Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Emergency Medical Services for Children (EMSC) Partnership grant to Kentucky, and has been continuously funded since.

Today, the bulk of Fallat's professional focus is in the area of "pediatric readiness," an EMSC program to improve the readiness of individual EMS services and hospital emergency departments to care for an ill or injured child.

"It's a scoring system based on a hundred points and there's buckets of things to pay attention to, including personnel, education, training, protocols, making sure your equipment works and that it's in the right place," she explains. "There are 70 published papers that show a pediatric readiness score of somewhere between 87-93 or above saves lives of children who are really hurt or really ill."

The Pediatric Pandemic Network is an outgrowth of that effort, a HRSA-funded collaborative network of children's hospitals



Fallat, bottom left, with colleagues at the Norton Children's Hospital in Louisville

nationwide that works on a hub and spoke model to ready the country for a pandemic, mass casualty, or widespread emergency. Fallat was tapped to run the Trauma Burn Domain at the Norton Children's Hospital Hub in Louisville.

"I just had finished this huge project looking at pediatric trauma system development in the country, so this was an opportunity to build on that model," she says. "Our premise is, if you're not pediatric ready every day, how will you ever be able to be ready in a pandemic?"

But she's not only concerned with emergency care. As first vice president of the American College of Surgeons (ACS), Fallat focused her efforts on gaps in rural surgery and training with the goal of making sure

children in rural and underserved areas have the right surgical resources. She also co-chairs the ACS Children's Surgical Surgery Verification Program, which performs voluntary verification site reviews on children's surgical services, mainly in children's hospitals across the country.

"Children deserve to be treated as a distinct population—they have their own rights and privileges, and a lot of times people discount them because they're children," she says.

## UPSTATE ROOTS

As a high school student in Auburn, New York, Fallat planned to become a math teacher. Then she got a part-time job working in the housekeeping department of the local hospital. "My supervisor, Mrs. Morse, only retained people who met her specifications, and she'd go around with a white glove to check your work," she says. "I credit her for my development of brilliant housekeeping skills."

Fallat was able to interact with patients when cleaning bed units, but the ultimate experience was cleaning the operating room. "That was fabulous," she says. "I went directly from wanting to be a teacher to wanting to be a surgeon."

She went to Northwestern University to study science. On a flight from Chicago to Syracuse to interview for medical school at Upstate Medical University, Fallat found herself seated next to David Murray, MD, HS '59, then chair of the Department of Orthopedic Surgery. "We talked the entire time," she recalls.

Fallat had her interview and received an acceptance letter two weeks later. "I don't know if there was any



Fallat with a young patient

connection, but I felt like fate intervened,” she says.

At Upstate, she shared her surgical aspirations with her roommate, a fourth-year student, asking who she should seek out as her advisor. “Dr. Patricia Numann ’65,” she was told.

In short order, Fallat went to Dr. Numann’s office, where she was accepted as an advisee. Over time, their relationship grew into a lifelong mentorship and friendship.

Fallat admits being briefly tempted by the field of pediatrics after a rotation with Frank Oski, MD, chair of pediatrics and editor of the pre-eminent textbook in the field. “I did a project with him looking at mothers who breastfed versus those who didn’t and infection rates in their infants. It was the very first paper that I published and he made me the first author,” she says.

Numann suggested Fallat do an acting internship in pediatric surgery to clarify her interests. Fallat spent the first rotation of her fourth year working with Upstate’s pediatric surgery group. The experience cemented her decision to be a pediatric surgeon.

Fallat credits Numann’s influence in advising her on where to look for surgical residencies. “It was a time when women did not often choose surgery as a career and many programs were direct in telling me that they had trained very few or no women,” she says. “Dr. Numann had interviewed for a faculty position in Louisville, Kentucky, with Dr. Hiram Polk, but decided to stay in Syracuse, so I put the University of Louisville on my list of residency programs to visit.”

Although Dr. Polk was out of town during her visit, he later wrote Fallat a letter she has kept to this day. “He wrote telling me about all the women that had finished his program, where they were practicing, and how many were in training,” she says. “This was where I matched.”

## CARVING A WIDE PATH

Fallat was one of three female interns in general surgery when she began her residency at the University of Louisville, which she followed with a research surgery fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital, and a fellowship in pediatric surgery at Children’s National Hospital in Washington, DC.

She found important role models in her chief, Judson Randolph, MD, and his second in command, Kathy Anderson, MD. Dr. Randolph was left-handed, as was Fallat. “There was a lot of intentionality at the time about making left-handed surgical residents be right-handed or learn how to be ambidextrous,” she says. “Their attitude was entirely different with Dr. Anderson pronouncing that she would be ‘on the correct side of the table all of the time whether operating or assisting.’ Dr. Randolph and I worked left-handed with right-handed instruments just fine.”

While in her fellowship, the University of Louisville

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surgery department reached out to offer her a job. One of their surgeons had left and they would hold off on a search if she was interested in coming back. They also offered a paid research sabbatical within the first two years so that she could hone her research skills to start a lab.

The offer was too good to pass. During her research fellowship at Mass General, Fallat worked with Patricia K. Donahoe, MD, who studied hormones that influence the embryology of the reproductive system and the abnormalities that sometimes require surgery. Dr. Donahoe let Fallat continue to use her hormone assay to branch into her own area of research. She used that sabbatical to spend five months working with John Hutson, MD, at the University of Melbourne, whose research related to the undescended testicle. When she returned to Louisville, she started a research lab focusing on aspects of male and female reproductive endocrinology, which was funded for 25 years.

If it isn’t obvious yet, Fallat is not one to be pigeonholed.

As a surgical resident, she spent a collective 12 months doing trauma care, and was further influenced by the sophisticated trauma team concept she experienced as a fellow at Children’s Hospital, inspiring her commitment to trauma care at Louisville.

Fallat also developed extensive experience in the area of reproductive abnormalities in children, both as a research fellow and as a pediatric surgical fellow. “Dr. Randolph had a special interest in children who had differences in sexual differentiation and so I was involved in a lot of those procedures,” she says.

Early in her career at Louisville—which had started the first fellowship in pediatric and adolescent gynecology—Fallat became an advocate for ovary sparing surgery in the treatment of benign disease in children.

As president of the American Pediatric Surgical Association, she requested a special session on the topic, and as a member of the Midwest Pediatric Surgical Consortium, participated in a funded study to develop guidelines to help physicians determine what was in the best interest of the individual pediatric patient with an ovarian mass.

Those experiences derived from an interest in pediatric medical ethics. Fallat served on the Committee on Bioethics for the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and was the first surgeon to chair this national committee. She has written AAP position statements on pediatric professionalism, fertility preservation for children and adolescents who have cancer, and resuscitation strategies for terminally ill children who need surgery. Guidelines she developed have become standard, earning her recognition by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2022 with the William G. Bartholome Award for Ethical Excellence.

Later, she worked with Tom Abell, MD, a national expert in gastroenterology, and became credentialed to place both gastric and sacral stimulators, starting a surgical motility program at Norton Children's Hospital.

Fallat has a significant record of service and leadership. She has served as chair of the American College of Surgeons Advisory Council for Pediatric Surgery, chair of the Surgical Section of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), vice president of the American Association for the Surgery of Trauma, and president of the American Pediatric Surgical Association. In 2020, she became chair of the American Pediatric Surgical Association Foundation, and in 2022-23 served as first vice president of the ACS.

At Louisville, she has served as both surgeon-in-chief and medical director of surgical quality at Norton Children's Hospital; program director of the pediatric surgery fellowship training program; division director of pediatric surgery; and was named the first Hirikati S. Nagaraj Endowed Professor in the Department of Surgery.

Fallat has received numerous awards throughout her career, including the University of Louisville Distinguished Faculty Award, the American Academy of Pediatrics' William E. Ladd Medal, the American Pediatric Surgery Association Distinguished Service Award, Norton HealthCare Physician of the Year, and the Pediatric Trauma Society Lifetime Achievement



Fallat with Upstate President Mantosh Dewan, MD, and Paul Norcross, executive director of the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation

Award. This year, she received the Nina Starr Braunwald Award from the Association of Women Surgeons and the Distinguished Alumna Award from the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation.

But Fallat, who sends out some 250 holiday cards a year, takes her accolades in the many relationships she has developed throughout her career.

As a busy clinician, Fallat was a popular preceptor sought out by medical students. "My nickname was Midnight Mary because there were times I was up all night operating. If a student needed 20 hours, they could shadow me and get the whole 20 hours in a day," she says.

Through the years, she's mentored many medical students and residents, some who worked with her on research projects, and others who went on to become pediatric surgeons. "I'd like to think I had a hand in guiding and shaping their careers. Many are not just mentees, but now friends," says Fallat.

This year, she began a phased retirement that will conclude in 2026. Her clinical practice is limited to complex surgical patients whose care is not yet complete. Most of her time is spent on efforts related to pediatric readiness for EMS and emergency departments, concentrating on trauma and burns, through the Pediatric Pandemic Network.

"I am not working any less, I am just spending my time differently and getting more sleep," she says.

Having more time with family and friends is on her retirement bucket list, along with travel and getting around to cataloguing the great wine collection she and her husband have amassed.

When she travels to meetings, which is pretty frequent, Fallat says she makes it a point to try and connect with someone she knows in the city for dinner. "Early on, David Richardson, MD, who was influential in my surgical training, advised me to always look at the program schedule in advance and find a half-day to carve out personal time to go to a museum or go shopping," she says. "That is great advice that I still take and give others."

—Renée Gearhart Levy



Fallat and her husband, Tom Walker, have been married for 35 years and have three adult children. The family celebrated daughter Krista's wedding in October. From left, Alex Walker, Tom Walker, Krista Donahoe, Joe Donahoe, Mary Fallat, Andrew Walker and Kim Campbell.