

HELP WANTED

The nation's hospitals are facing a shortage of surgeons. At University Hospital that shortage is felt nowhere more acutely than in pediatric surgery.

By Renée Gearhart Levy

Back in 2006, University Hospital's four pediatric surgeons conducted about 2,000 surgeries. This year, the remaining surgeon, Michael Ratner, MD '68, expects to complete 500-600 surgeries. The gap will be filled by visiting pediatric surgeons who work at University Hospital on a *locum tenens* basis until University Hospital can recruit additional pediatric surgical staff.

"We don't have anywhere to send these sick children," says Dr. Ratner, Chief of Pediatric Surgery since 1988. "This is a major University center and the major referral area for about 2.5 million people in the middle of the state. We can't send them anywhere close by—either there's no pediatric surgeon or we'd overwhelm their system."

The staff shortage is far from unique to Upstate. The lack of available pediatric surgeons is a trend that has been going for at least a decade and stems directly from miscalculations on the part of organized medicine and medical schools themselves.

In the early 1970s, the American College of Surgeons and American Surgical Association jointly sponsored the national Study on Surgical Services for the United States. Known as SOSSUS, the study projected a surplus of surgeons in the coming years and recommended reducing both training programs and the number of surgical specialists trained.

The survey found that too few medical school graduates were entering primary care and the hope was to direct new physicians to those areas. Medical schools complied by reducing training

programs and holding enrollment relatively constant. From 1980 to 2005, medical school enrollment was flat while the U.S. population grew by more than 70 million, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

The only problem is, SOSSUS was wrong. As the 79 million baby boomers begin entering retirement age, so do their doctors. From 1985 to 2006, the percentage of doctors 55 and older rose from 27 percent to 34 percent, and the AAMC predicted in a 2006 report that members of this group — roughly 250,000 active physicians — will retire by 2020.

Is there a shortage of primary care physicians? Absolutely, and particularly in rural areas. But there is also a shortage of surgeons—chiefly highly skilled specialty surgeons.

"Society's demand for certain specialty healthcare that was not anticipated has resulted in real shortages," says John Fortune, MD, interim chair of the Upstate Department of Surgery. "We're in a real Catch-22. People are screaming that we need more surgeons in certain underserved areas, but there's no money to pay for graduate medical education. It's a complete perfect storm right now for the specialty needs we're looking for."

At Upstate Medical University, that pinch is felt no where more acutely than in the Department of Surgery's Division of Pediatric Surgery. Over the past two years, as Upstate builds its new children's hospital, the institution's staff of pediatric surgeons dwindled from four to one, due to retirement and recruitment elsewhere.

Surgeon migration is a particular concern because the national pool of pediatric surgeons is so small. According to Mary Barber, vice president of health-care executive and physician search firm Cejka Search, fewer than 50 pediatric surgeons in the nation are available to relocate for new jobs, creating a highly competitive hiring environment that puts the squeeze on hospitals when doctors leave.

And with fewer than 30 new pediatric surgeons a year coming out of American universities, this pool of available pediatric surgeons has their pick of about 150 open positions across the country at any given time.

"These people can go anywhere they want," says Ratner. "We're recruiting against Orlando, Phoenix, Atlanta, Boston, New York and Philadelphia. There are communities across the United States that have the same problem we do. For instance, Albany doesn't have a pediatric surgeon right now. Rochester lost one of two. Buffalo lost one of four." In other words, there are very few pediatric surgeons north of New York City.

The pediatric surgeon pool is shallow for reasons besides a lack of those willing to relocate to Central New York. There are only 700 to 800 in practice across the country. And a pediatric surgery subspecialty requires a physician to gain licensing in adult surgery, then spend two more years training in pediatric surgery. Historically, compensation has lagged that of their adult general surgery colleagues.

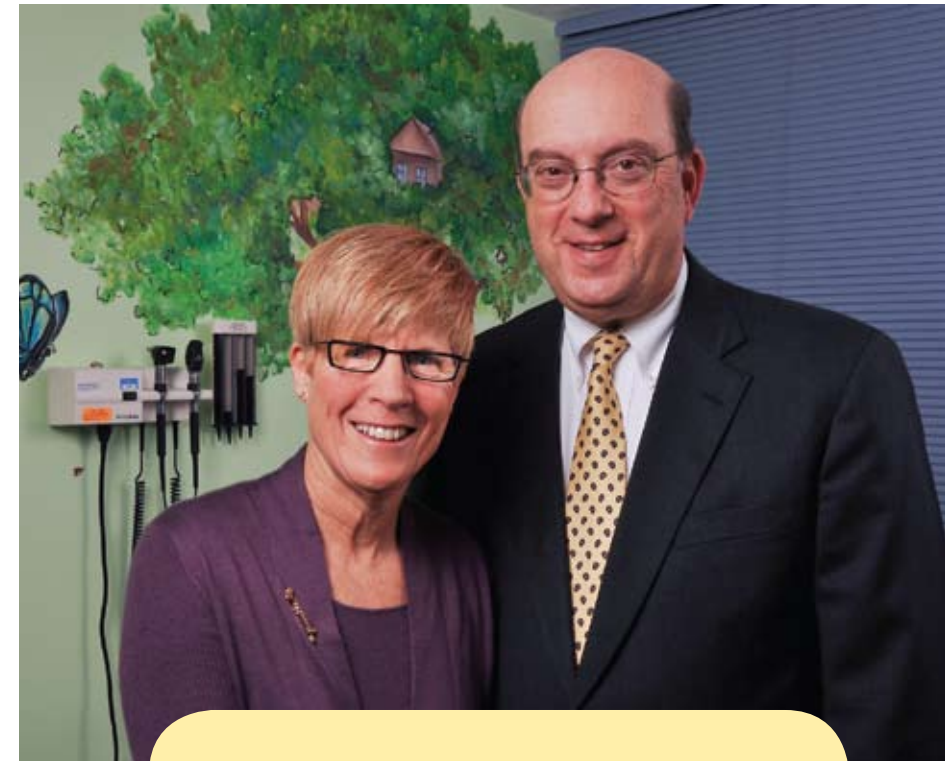
According to Thomas Welch, chair of the Department of Pediatrics, many of these pediatric patients are covered by Medicaid, whose reimbursement is low. That makes offering competitive salaries to attract pediatric surgeons difficult.

To address that problem, Upstate has raised more than \$1 million toward a \$1.5 million endowment to create an endowed professorship in pediatric surgery. While the institution has long been actively recruiting, having an endowment to offer raises the stakes, along with the Golisano Children's Hospital opening in 2009.

"The professorship will be a tremendous attraction that doesn't exist in other institutions," says Dr. Fortune. "This institution's commitment to recruiting talented pediatric surgeons and to making this position attractive is unparalleled. This job is as attractive as any in the United States, but we're dealing with a competitive recruiting situation outside the control of our institution."

Despite the rigors and pitfalls of pediatric surgery, Ratner, who has practiced at University Hospital for more than 30 years, says he'd do the same thing all over again. "I could never go back to taking care of adults. Kids are just fantastic. In general, nothing stops them," he says.

"When you take care of a newborn, you know you have helped that patient for 75 years ahead. I get invited to a lot of graduation parties and weddings. It's a lot of fun." ■



Endowed Professorship Honors Ratners

As a tribute to his years of dedicated service to Central New York children, Upstate's endowed professorship in pediatric surgery will be named for pediatric surgeon Michael Ratner, MD '68, and his wife, Rissa.

"That was a surprise and I'm very touched," says Dr. Ratner of the endowment, which he hopes will help Upstate attract new senior pediatric surgical talent who can take over his leadership role.

"The endowment will fund research in pediatric surgery, salaries, help hire nurse practitioners—whatever the person wants to do to help the program here at the University," Ratner says.

The physician hired as the first Michael H. and Rissa Ratner Endowed Professorship in Pediatric Surgery will take over Ratner's role as Chief of Pediatric Surgery. Upstate hopes to have a candidate in place when the Golisano Children's Hospital opens in 2009.

For more information on this endowment, or to make a gift, please contact Upstate Medical University Development Officer Don Zorn at 315.464.4274 or zornd@upstate.edu.