

SURGERY Synopsis

Carlos A. Pellegrini, MD — The First 20 Years as Department Chair by Ron V. Maier, MD



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I was asked by the Editorial Board of Surgery Synopsis to be the guest editor for this issue. I readily agreed when they explained to me that in this issue, many of the items would be recognizing Dr. Pellegrini's 20 years of service as Chair of the Department of Surgery. A central portion of the Harkins Symposium was devoted to a celebration and tribute to his leadership. Faculty at the University, former mentors, colleagues and friends came from literally around the world to let us know what Dr. Pellegrini has meant to their lives and careers. We were regaled with stories, accolades and some "interesting" photographs for two hours. A more complete description of the day's events is later in this issue. Perhaps the best part of this celebration was that we were able to keep the tribute a complete secret from Dr. Pellegrini. As those of you know, it is, indeed, a rare event that Carlos is not aware.

This issue will not attempt to provide a complete biography nor catalogue all of his many awards, contributions and achievements. But, in addition to the tributes from invited guests, we also want to present Dr. Pellegrini as those of us in the Department see him: in the OR, in teaching rounds, working with his Fellows, in leadership conversations, and at his home. And, we want to talk a little about what his leadership has meant to the Department.

Recruited in 1992, Dr. Pellegrini became Chair of the Department of Surgery at the University of Washington. He came to us by way of the University of California, San Francisco, via the University of Chicago, via Argentina. He brought with him a personal and world perspective that has led him to be a fearless and innovative leader. When he came to the Department, we had 46 clinical faculty members. Today, we have 96 clinical faculty – a gain of 50 that more than doubled our assistant, associate and professor-level faculty.

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Dr. Carlos A. Pellegrini
circa 1992

During this 20-year span, Dr. Pellegrini built the Department into a clinical powerhouse – not just by the number of faculty, but also programmatically. As a result of his own research and clinical interests, the Center for Esophageal & Gastric Surgery was established. He championed a Vascular Surgery Institute that is now a reality. He advocated for an expanded Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery service

at UWMC. He brought robotic surgery into the ORs for GI surgery and in other specialties. He actively backed the Cardiac Surgery program as it expanded into new locations, as well as services. Within the last year, our cardiac surgeons have implanted, as a bridge, the first totally artificial heart in the region – and then successfully transplanted a heart into the patient.

His passion and attention to surgical education for the germination and training of the next generation of surgical leaders has made our residency and fellowship programs top-tier, with our general surgery residency program routinely one of the top 10 programs throughout the country. Our resident recruitments represent the pedigree and true diversity necessary to produce an excellent surgical work force for the future of America.

ISIS, the Institute for Simulation and Interprofessional Studies, was his brain-child. While most other programs were merely thinking about simulation as a key to better training and patient care, Dr. Pellegrini championed it. He was, and is, a national leader in ensuring that simulation training is given stature within the American College of Surgeons. Early on, he advocated that standards for accreditation be developed and implemented for simulation centers. ISIS became one of the first – when there were fewer than 10 programs nationally – to receive this accreditation.

Most recently, he has led the Department in revitalization of our Research Program. The current goal of the Department of Surgery’s research effort is to become “the premier home for surgical research.” A first step to revitalize research was investment in outcomes and health systems research. Through the recruitment and support of Dr. David Flum, the department has become a leader in health services and

outcomes research. The development of the Surgical Care and Outcomes Assessment Program (SCOAP) is a shining example of physician-led quality improvement on a state-wide and voluntary basis, with the University as the hub. This research program is now being mimicked nationwide. Dr. Pellegrini’s reinvestment in departmental research is bearing fruit. Just 10 years ago, our total grants and contracts were at \$10 million; in 2011, they were more than \$25 million and growing.

And, critically, Dr. Pellegrini has been our representative voice and a leader within the School of Medicine. Dean Ramsey has asked him to take on some of the most difficult issues and challenges because he recognizes that if Carlos believes in it, he will give it his all. For instance, he has been a tireless advocate for diversity within the School (and Department), always advancing the appropriate and just support for the growth of our global mission and educational ecumenicalism. In addition, he has led the charge for Professionalism, helping to make the University of Washington School of Medicine a place of civility and collegiality.

Dr. Pellegrini has long believed that in addition to established methods for measuring scholarship, other scholarly activities should receive greater notice. Under his watch, the Appointments and Promotions Committee successfully reviewed and rewrote the guidelines for promotion within the Department. This successful endeavor was carefully reviewed by all of the University A & P bodies and approved with acclaim. The result is a single track for promotion in the department and a broad-based faculty with diverse skills and greatly increased sense of equality.

His greatest gifts to the Department, though, have been those of a caring individual: a leader, mentor and friend. A phrase commonly used to define him is that he is a man of rare emotional intelligence. He has produced a lifetime of personal interactions that have generated a following of loyal and dedicated friends and colleagues.

As an example of his commitment to his trainees and his comfort level in life, I provide a personal experience. Carlos and I were asked to join in the celebration of marriage by one of his early fellowship trainees in the then-named “Swallowing Center.” As his professional “father figure,” Carlos could not refuse. So, Carlos and I traveled together to Mexico for the traditional ceremony. The pride of the Fellow at having his “El Jefe” attend was obvious. It was an

elaborate matrimonial mass and I knew Carlos, who is not Catholic, might not know all of the traditions and sacraments. At one point I said, “Are you OK with participating in all parts of the ceremony?” His simple, easy answer was, “Don’t worry, I know how to do this.” Always ready to help a colleague, friend or trainee, always involved, and always comfortable in his support and his decisions. He is a true leader at every turn.

Many of us have had the pleasure of working side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder with him over these past 20 years. Many of those he has mentored have returned to be a part of the Department of Surgery. Sprinkled through this issue, you will hear from many of our Department faculty, residents and fellows as they describe how he has influenced them, led them, mentored them, made them laugh, played tricks on them or given them friendship when that was needed. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Ron V. Maier, MD
Professor and

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Editors’ Note: We received many anecdotes - too many to publish in this issue. However, they soon will be available online for you to read.

Alec Clowes, MD, Professor, Division of Vascular Surgery

I first met Carlos when I invited him for breakfast in the Georgian Room at the Four Seasons Hotel in 1992. At the time, I was a member of the search committee for the new chair of Surgery, but I was also the acting chair! After ordering breakfast, he slammed his knife on the table and said: “Why aren’t you taking this job?” My answer was that he was the perfect person, because of his huge international reputation and commitment to clinical surgery and surgical education. Although Dean Phil Fialkow had asked me to consider the post, I told him that I was committed to a career in research

and surgery and would not be as good a chief as Pellegrini. I was right, and the rest is history.

Ben Starnes, MD, Professor, Division Chief, Vascular Surgery

Carlos Pellegrini is the best boss I have ever had. He recruited me to the University of Washington in 2007 to lead the Division of Vascular Surgery. It is difficult for me to single out a single story to exemplify his unparalleled leadership abilities but one in particular stands out in my mind.

I was having an issue within my Division that was particularly sensitive. Carlos and I saw different perspectives on how to handle the problem. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon and I called him on his cell phone and asked to meet with him in person immediately to discuss the issue. He gave me three options: 1) he could come to me; 2) I could go to him; or, 3) we could meet at the hospital. There was only one minor issue; he was bringing his wife Kelly home from the hospital that afternoon. Kelly had just had knee surgery. I, of course, told him I would come to him. He then asked, “What is Jessica (my 9 year old daughter) doing?” I was a little perplexed by the question and then he said, “Bring her with you.”

When I arrived, he took Jessica to meet his two new Labrador puppies, Melba and Pancho. As we stood in his driveway for an hour discussing this very difficult situation, we watched Jessica playing in the yard with the puppies.

We eventually came to mutual resolution and after returning home, I received an email from him. “Ben, this is what I call making lemonade with lemons. We took a very difficult situation and made it memorable in a good way by watching Jessica play with the puppies.”

Carlos Pellegrini is a leader’s leader. He not only sacrifices his personal time on a daily basis for our organization, he has the wisdom and experience to mentor future leaders.

Brant Oelschlager, MD, Professor, Section Chief, GI Surgery

There are many reasons why I believe Carlos Pellegrini to be such an extraordinary surgeon, mentor, friend, and leader, and there are countless examples. In fact, there are so many examples that each one seems like an ordinary and daily occurrence – which of course they are.

I could tell you about my first day of residency when he recognized my name as someone he had “taken a chance on,” and while passing me in the hall with the chief and fellow in tow, said hello and finished by saying “Don’t screw up, Oelschlager. Or I am sending you back to North Carolina.” In 20 seconds he had recognized me as a person, taken ownership of my future, and held me accountable. How many of us have felt this countless times under his leadership? He has an incredible ability to create and communicate a vision, but just as easily wants to further our visions. Not by making them his own, but like good fertilizer allowing them to grow bigger and better than they would have by just our own efforts.

I could tell you about the times when he would offer a suggestion about a case, spend countless hours making a paper shine, or sending a well-timed note to further your cause. But, I think what I remember most about the last 20 years are countless times when he shared a story about himself or someone else and a difficult situation. Sometimes I was not sure why he was telling me the story, but I came to realize he was teaching me. Sometimes it was to prepare me to handle certain situations, sometimes current; others in the future. Other times it was to make me look inside myself and examine something that need adjusting or change.

If I listened, I became a better person. I suspect most of us who have come in contact with him would say the same: we are unquestionably better people for having known him.

David Flum, MD, Professor, Associate Chair for Research

When I started at the UW I had a first meeting with Dr Pellegrini to talk about the things that interested me and what I saw as my path as a junior faculty member. I told him about the vision I had to build a system so that surgeons at all hospitals would learn from each

other - so that we didn’t keep on repeating each other’s mistakes in surgery. I talked about my idea of blending the science of public health and surgery. Though my ideas were half-baked, I think he saw how earnest I was about it.

He listened carefully, focused and thoughtful, and just as I was expecting to get some sage advice about taking on more reasonable projects, his face turned to a broad smile, he walked to his computer, and turned his screen saver to face me. He said, “See this picture of a beautiful dog?” Then came what I remember as a very long and uncomfortable pause while I tried to figure out what he was telling me.

He said “This is my Dublin. I love this dog so much and I would spend all my time with him if I could. But Dave, Dublin has nothing to do with my career. Because of that, I love him even more.”

I didn’t get his point at first: Was he telling me that I was chasing a pipe dream? Was he telling me I should learn to separate work pursuits from a life outside of work? Then he said to me, “If you take this path, make sure it’s your “Dublin.” You’ll have to love it and be devoted to it and be passionate about it...and you need to do it without the expectation that it will ever advance your career.”

He taught me then and teaches me every day that pursuing things in life with passion, independent of “pay-back,” is the most worthy thing we can do. He is the truest mentor, showing in everything he does that chasing the right things for the right reasons, being genuine about our interests and the way we treat people in the world is the surest way to be.

Each time I walk into his office I think about that Dublin moment. Many years have passed and I now have several “Dublins” - at home and at work. My research fellows and kids now have their “Dublins,” too. What I thought was a casual remark about his dog helped me see the real legacy of the man. He taught me we are not separate pieces: work life and home life, but a woven cloth of values and passions that guide all we do. It’s a lesson I share with all my students and one that I will be forever grateful having learned at the start of my career. That was the point of the Dublin story. Though it was part of the reason my career advanced, the journey has been so much richer than the destination. That was his point.

**Charles Mock, MD, MPH, PhD, Professor,
Trauma & Critical Care**

When I came to UW, there was no interest in global health in US surgery departments. Many chairs would have given no encouragement to a junior faculty member who worked on a topic for which there was no funding and no recognized career path. However, Dr. Pellegrini saw benefit in what I was doing and was incredibly helpful, especially in allowing me time to work in Africa and at WHO. I feel that his investment in me has paid off. Global health is now a bona fide career path for academic surgeons in the US. The UW Surgery Department is at the forefront of developing this important field, as evidenced by our unique and much sought after Global Health in Academic Surgery Track.

**Andy Wright, MD, Associate Professor,
General Surgery**

As a resident at the “other UW” (University of Wisconsin), I was often tasked to drive visiting professors to the hospital. The first time I met Dr. Pellegrini I was late to the airport and completely unprepared to also pick up Kelly (in my 2-door hatchback with twin car seats in the back). I had little idea at that time that he would become a mentor and friend. I later came to the “real UW” for my MIS fellowship specifically to study with Dr. Pellegrini. From him I have not only learned how to be a better clinician, educator, and surgeon, but also to be a better person. He is a true visionary and if I can accomplish 1/10 as much in my career as he has, I will be very lucky indeed.

**Rebecca Petersen, MD, Assistant Professor,
General Surgery**

One of the great things about working with Dr. Pellegrini is his contemporary approach to surgical training. I will always be appreciative of his support as his Fellow during my pregnancy with my boys. He was enthusiastic and completely supportive. Much to my amazement, to add to the extensive list of his accomplishments, he told me he too was having twins. After clarifying this was not a miracle of modern medicine,

I was delighted to hear he was to become a first time grandfather of two. Congratulations Dr. Pellegrini for all of your many accomplishments! I am sure the best things are yet to come.

**Peter Wu, MD, Associate Professor,
General Surgery (VA)**

One of his best attributes is how he treats everyone like family. When I first arrived in Seattle, he invited my entire family including our dog to his home. Even though we expressed our concern, he requested we unleash the dog to make him feel at home and not to worry. Of course, our dog promptly bolted out of the Pellegrini estate and right into the home of his neighbors who were having a celebration of their own. We both went to his neighbor’s home where we were greeted with open arms and our dog obediently followed Carlos’ commands as if he had known him forever.

**Nicholas Vedder, MD, Professor, Chief,
Plastic Surgery**

Dr. Pellegrini has taught me many things:

- Always look for a win-win solution
- Whenever asking for something, always begin by giving something
- If you are always willing to give, in the end, you will receive far more than you ever dreamed of.

**E. Patchen Dellinger, MD, Chief,
Division of General Surgery**

I have been in the Department for 35 years and worked with three permanent and two acting chairs. I respect all of them. But, Carlos has been far and away the most effective of the five in establishing links to all faculty and residents and in building and strengthening the Department both within the School of Medicine and nationally and internationally.