

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

MIZZOU

The Doctor Is In

Hugh E. Stephenson Jr. served the university as a student, surgeon, professor and curator.

*Originally published in Summer
2005 MIZZOU magazine.*

Story by John Beahler

Published Nov. 7, 2012

He might look for all the world like Norman Rockwell's most revered medical icon — the country doctor, sitting behind a desk in his cluttered office, listening patiently and sympathetically as patients catalog their ailments. Don't be fooled. Dr. Hugh E. Stephenson Jr. is anything but a quaint anachronism.



Illustration by Robert Gunn.

During a career that spanned six decades at Mizzou, Stephenson, BA, BS Med '43, was an innovator in the

operating room and a crusader for medical education in Missouri. In 1958, with the technology still in its infancy, he performed some of the state's first open-heart surgeries. As a surgery resident at New York's Bellevue Hospital in 1950, he invented the cardiac "crash cart" that included an electric defibrillator to shock a patient's heart back to life, and he pioneered other treatment techniques to save the lives of heart attack victims in the critical first minutes after an attack.

When Mizzou opened the doors of its four-year medical school in the 1950s, Stephenson was one of the founding faculty members. Over the years, he's trained thousands of physicians, and he helped steer University Hospital as it grew into a top-flight academic medical center.

Stephenson officially retired in 1994. He's now the Growdon Distinguished Professor of Surgery Emeritus, and Mizzou's surgery department has been named in his honor. At age 83 as of June 1, you can find him most days in his office adjoining the dean's suite in the School of Medicine. Stephenson is still going strong at a time when some of his first medical students are hanging up their stethoscopes.

Mizzou's current crop of med students might not realize it, but without

Key Dates in Hugh Stephenson's Career

1943 Hugh E. Stephenson Jr. graduates from MU's two-year medical school.

1950 As an intern, Stephenson develops the cardiac "crash cart."

1955 MU launches a four-year medical program after more

Stephenson's efforts they might well be attending school somewhere else. He was the point man in a sometimes rancorous battle over whether to establish the four-year medical school in Columbia or in a metropolitan area. As a young medical resident in New York City more than a half-century ago, he poured pocketfuls of change into Bellevue Hospital's pay phones, burning up the phone lines back to Missouri to lobby for state appropriations to build the school in Columbia.

The decision seems like a no-brainer today, but it kindled a fierce debate in the early 1950s. Some opponents thought the med school should be located in Kansas City. Others argued that the state couldn't possibly afford to build a first-rate medical program in Columbia. Still others scoffed that a medical school outside the state's urban areas wouldn't generate the volume and variety of patients needed to train new doctors.

Stephenson made the long train ride home from New York to help rally the troops whenever he could. He testified at legislative hearings, met with individual lawmakers and patiently promoted the plan to editorial writers. Because MU is 100

than 40 years of a two-year curriculum.

1956 MU dedicates a new medical center. Stephenson becomes associate professor of surgery, chair of surgery and chief of general surgery.

1958 Stephenson performs MU's first open-heart surgery.

1962 to 1999

Stephenson represents Missouri in the American Medical Association House of Delegates. He is chair of the Missouri delegation from **1990 to 1993**.

1969 MU begins groundbreaking studies for an automatic implantable defibrillator developed by John Schuder. MU was one of the first three medical centers to implant the defibrillator during clinical trials in 1982, and Stephenson

miles from the state's major metro areas, a medical school at Mizzou would help meet a critical shortage of doctors in rural Missouri, he argued. It would give rural Missourians access to advanced medical care that was available only in metropolitan areas. The new school's researchers would help create cures for the diseases that afflicted Missourians.

After a protracted battle, Gov. Forrest Smith signed a bill on May 29, 1952, that appropriated \$6 million for the four-year medical school. Construction was under way before long at the south edge of MU on what was then the campus golf course. The School of Medicine formally launched its four-year program in 1955.

From his vantage point more than 50 years later, Stephenson says Mizzou's School of Medicine has more than met its goal of bringing the latest health care to rural Missouri. "I definitely think that's one of the school's great accomplishments," he says. MU Health Care hospitals admitted 17,380 patients in 2004, and Mizzou doctors handled 460,000 clinic visits and 35,000 emergency center visits. Those patients came from every county in Missouri and traveled from other states and foreign

performed some of the surgical implants.

1974 Stephenson publishes *Immediate Care of the Acutely Ill and Injured*.

1978 Stephenson publishes *Paro cardioco y su tratamients*.

1982 to 1994

Stephenson serves as the first elected chief of staff at University Hospital.

1981 Stephenson publishes *The Kicks That Count*.

1988 to 1989

Stephenson serves as interim dean of the School of Medicine.

1994 to 1995

Stephenson leads the AMA's Council on Medical Education.

1995 to 1996

Stephenson co-chairs the AMA Liaison Committee on Medical Education.

countries for treatment. Satellite specialty clinics and advances in telemedicine, Stephenson adds, have broadened the school's impact.

“The School of Medicine is one of the greatest gems the people of Missouri have. Its contributions have benefited the entire state,” Stephenson says. “Students come from small towns, the villages, the hamlets, the cities to study medicine here. They realize they're just as good as anybody else, and they go out and amount to something.”

Plenty of his former students did just that. Many are leaders in the medical profession, and Stephenson follows their careers with a special pleasure. The affection is mutual; at alumni gatherings, former students line up to shake hands and have a photo taken with their favorite professor.

“You should see the number of students who remember him and love him and send letters,” says his wife, Sally. “Hugh has always cared about his students personally, and I think they can tell that. He always remembers their names. He's probably written thousands of letters of recommendation.”

1996 Stephenson is named to the University of Missouri System Board of Curators and serves as president in **2000**.

1998 Stephenson publishes *Aesculapius Was a Mizzou Tiger: An Illustrated History of Medicine at Ol' Mizzou*.

2001 Stephenson publishes *America's First Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology: The Story of Guthrie and Carrel*.

2003 MU's Department of Surgery is named after Stephenson.

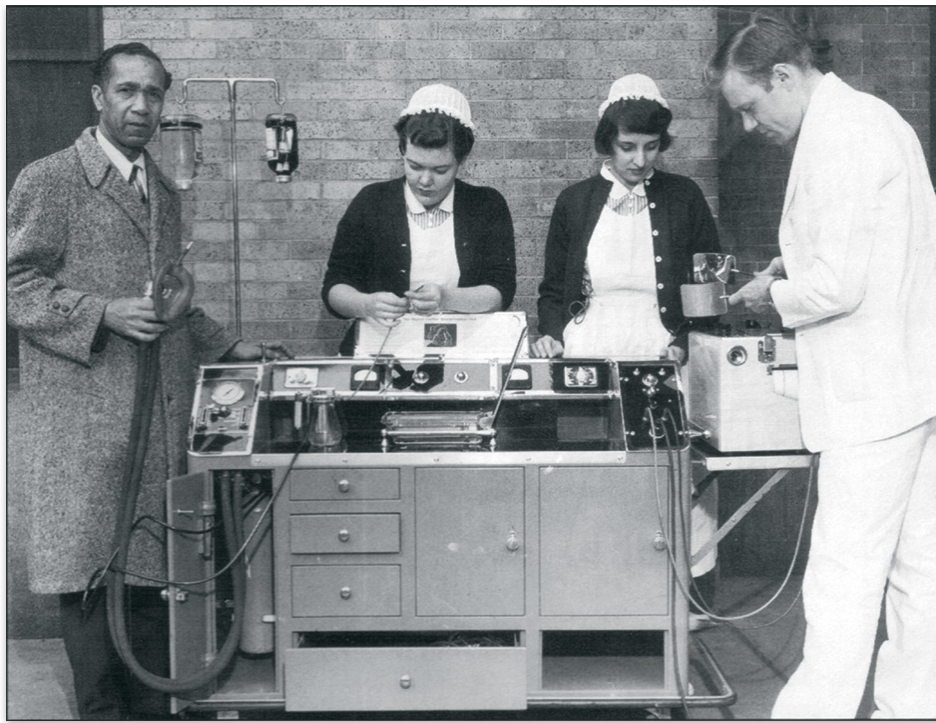
2004 Stephenson and his wife, Sally, establish a \$2 million deanship in medicine at MU.

The Stephensons continue to have a lasting impact on medical training at Mizzou. Last October, they established a \$2 million endowed deanship at the school. Stephenson says the gift is a vote of confidence for William Crist, MD '69, the current dean of medicine. Over the past five years, Crist has raised more than \$45 million in gifts and has recruited nationally known chairs for 16 of the school's 20 departments.

“He is determined to bring this medical school into the upper echelon of all schools in the country,” Stephenson says. “We’ve been so impressed with his vision for the school, and we want him to have the tools he needs.” Funds from the endowment will give Crist more resources to support teaching, research and faculty recruitment.

“We wanted to do whatever we could to increase enthusiasm for the School of Medicine,” Stephenson says. “We are confident others will join in support.”

No one could be more enthusiastic about the medical school than Stephenson. There were other prestigious job offers when he finished his residency at Bellevue, but he wanted to return to his hometown. “The opportunity to be part of a new medical school was something I had looked forward to,” he says.



Dr. Hugh Stephenson, right, invented the cardiac “crash cart” as an intern at Bellevue Hospital in 1950.

Sally Stephenson, a Washington, D.C., native, was working at Stephens College in Columbia when she met Hugh at a dinner party. She remembers some nights before they were married when Hugh would finish a grueling day in the surgery suite and then insist on stopping by his office to work on other projects before they went out to dinner. “She’s saying I neglected her,” he jokes. “It took me seven years to sweep her off her feet.” The couple married in 1964, and they have a son and a daughter.

Born and raised in Columbia, Stephenson has had plenty of opportunities to track the medical school’s progress. He grew up on Wilson Avenue, two blocks from MU in the heart of the East Campus neighborhood. He recalls excursions to nearby Hinkson Creek with boyhood pals and a pack of

neighborhood dogs. Later, one of his hometown chums was Wal-Mart founder and Columbia native Sam Walton, BS BA '40, who became a lifelong friend.

Stephenson's father was a dentist who practiced for 55 years in a fifth-floor office in the Guitar Building, across from the Boone County Courthouse.

Stephenson remembers walking by his dad's office every day on the way home from junior high school.

"I would look up and see him working on a patient. I thought some about becoming a dentist, but I decided it would be too much standing on my feet," he says. "Of course, I probably stood on my feet at the operating tables twice as long as my dad did."

His father influenced Stephenson's politics as well. The two were what was then an endangered species in Boone County: Republicans in a political landscape dominated by yellow-dog Democrats. "They didn't even have a Republican primary in Columbia in those days," he says. As an elementary school student, he carried campaign signs for Herbert Hoover. He even hitchhiked to Philadelphia to attend the 1940 Republican convention, then made a side trip to the New York World's Fair. "Hitchhiking was a respectable business back then," he says. "The whole trip, for three weeks, cost \$48."

His political predilection spawned another longtime passion, his collection of elephant figurines that fills

his office shelves. And, like that Republican mascot, Stephenson never forgets who gave him each elephant and the story behind it.

As a Columbia native, he also grew up rooting for the home-team Tigers. Stephenson wasn't just an avid football fan; he was a pigskin scholar, focusing in particular on the fine art of drop kicking. While he was a Mizzou undergraduate, Stephenson perfected a drop kicking technique that got the ball airborne so quickly it was practically unblockable.

Coach Don Faurot gave him a tryout, but a leg injury kept Stephenson out of the Tiger lineup. During his busy surgery career, this student of football did postgraduate work in drop kicking.

Using his physician's training in anatomy and physics, Stephenson designed a special shoe for drop kickers. University Hospital is just across the street from Memorial Stadium, and he often showed up at the stadium to practice kicking in his off-hours. He even set up regulation goal posts in his front yard so he and his son, Ted, could stay at the top of their form. In 1981, Stephenson wrote and published *The Kicks That Count*, a definitive text on drop kicking.

Stephenson's office is full of memorabilia from his long career; one prized memento is an autographed photo of President Ronald Reagan. He was a friend of Reagan's personal doctor. Knowing Reagan's interest

in football, the doctor presented him a copy of Stephenson's kicking book.

Not long after that, Stephenson received a phone call. A voice on the other end of the line asked him to hold for the president. "I thought, 'The president of what?'" he says. "President of the University? President of the PTA?" It turned out to be the president of the United States calling to talk about drop kicking. Stephenson was so flustered that he cut the phone call short. "I said, 'It's been great talking to you, Mr. President,' and I hung up."

He made amends during a later trip to California, when he called Reagan's home and asked to take him to lunch. "They called back and said, 'He'd love for you to come out and visit with him,'" Stephenson says. The two talked about the fine art of drop kicking and about George "The Gipper" Gipp, the legendary Notre Dame player that Reagan portrayed in the 1940 film *Knute Rockne All American*.

No matter how hectic the day, his students and patients never had to worry about getting a busy signal from Stephenson. He always prided himself on being "a bedside doctor" — at his best gently nudging out the most important information from a patient.

Unfortunately, those patient–doctor rituals have changed as the pace of medical practice accelerates in the era of HMOs, he says. "I think a lot of the bedside

activities now are less focused on the patient. A physician doesn't have near enough time to interact with patients, to get to know them."

A fear of lawsuits and the tight rein insurance companies hold on doctors also changed the patient-care equation, he says. "That's been, I think, a big negative. A lot of doctors retire early because of the experience."

Stephenson remembers his own tutelage as a student in MU's two-year medical program working under med school legends such as Pinson "Pappy" Neal, a crusty but respected professor who taught pathology at Mizzou for nearly 50 years. "He was a tough teacher, but he was fair," Stephenson says. "He understood how students functioned."



Stephenson and his wife, Sally, continue to influence medical education with their gift of a \$2

How does he characterize his own teaching style? "I was kind and gentle," Stephenson chuckles. "I always thought if you could make someone feel even greater than they are, they will rise to that occasion. You don't educate students by beating them down; that doesn't accomplish anything.

"Students come in early with a gleam in their eyes," he says, but sometimes the drudgery and

million endowed deanship at MU's School of Medicine in 2004.

memorization involved in traditional medical curricula

eliminate some of that gleam. He points to some recent successes at MU in restoring the shine. For instance, in the mid-1990s, the School of Medicine launched a problem-based learning curriculum in which small groups of students study actual medical cases instead of concentrating on classroom lectures. Mizzou student scores on national medical tests have soared.

His beloved University Hospital is turning the corner financially after several years of red ink and gloom-and-doom prognoses for its long-term health. MU has plans on the drawing board for an expansion of its medical research capability with a new Health Sciences Research and Education Center. MU Health Care is making steady progress on its goal to be designated as a comprehensive cancer center. Stephenson, as usual, sees plenty of reasons for optimism.

“We’ve had our ups and downs and our good days and bad days,” he says. “But honest to goodness, I’ve never had a single day I didn’t look forward to coming to work. It might be the day we discover a cure for cancer.”

More: [Iconic Doctor Has Big Heart](#)

Topics: History, Medicine, Nursing, Health Professions and
Veterinary Medicine, Web Exclusives

Tags: Faculty, Giving

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone:
573-882-5916 | Email: mizzou@missouri.edu

*Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the
Mizzou Alumni Association.*

© 2019 — Curators of the University of Missouri. All rights reserved. DMCA and other
copyright information.

An equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and veteran employer.