What Makes A Surgeon of Choice: Dr. John Maxwell

Assistant Professor Patricia Johnston (John) Maxwell IV, MD, is a colorectal surgeon who strikes the delicate balance of saving lives, seeming his patients’ trust, advising students, and expanding Jefferson’s community presence. In addition to performing surgery and saving patients, Dr. Maxwell is also actively involved as a faculty advisor to the Gibbon Surgical Society, comprised of hundreds of aspiring medical students at Jefferson (see “About the Surgeon” at right).

“People did the same for me in my training,” says Dr. Maxwell, “and I feel it’s my responsibility to give back as much as I can.” A South Carolina native, Dr. Maxwell was fellowship-trained at Jefferson; he earned his medical degree from the Medical University of South Carolina and completed his residency at Louisiana State University in New Orleans. His daughter was born two days before Hurricane Katrina, and he spent the next two years working in the heart of “Cajun country” in Lafayette, Louisiana.

“That’s where I began to see the subtle differences in caring for patients in a community setting as opposed to a large urban center,” says Dr. Maxwell. He is now helping expand the Jefferson colorectal surgery practice to Methodist Hospital, a community-based hospital in South Philadelphia. He spends a day there each week doing colon and on endoscopic procedures, and trains medical students on the Methodist rotation. For another weekly half-day, Dr. Maxwell offers prophylactic colorectal care in an office setting at St. Agnes Medical Center, also on South Broad Street.

Dr. Maxwell knows only too well that colorectal surgery can be a matter of life and death. Gene Benko, 72, came to Jefferson in an ambulance from Toms River, NJ, in September 2009 with a gastrointestinal hemorrhage in September 2009. With Dr. Maxwell’s help, Gene Benko of Toms River, NJ, has come a long way since he arrived at Jefferson with a gastrointestinal hemorrhage in September 2009.

Mr. Benko sees an internist and other surgeons, but removing the entire colon required an expert colorectal surgeon to emit intestinal waste. “A small price to pay to be alive,” says Mr. Benko. Three months later Dr. Maxwell performed another surgery to close and reattach the intestine. Despite some complications, which required a third procedure, Mr. Benko is extremely grateful for the care he received. “I chose the right surgeon,” he says. “Dr. Maxwell is extremely conscientious. I know I’m in good hands, and I’m determined to get myself better with his help.” While Mr. Benko sees an internist and other specialists closer to his home near Toms River, he says he will always make the trip to Philadelphia to see his surgeon of choice.

“I chose the right surgeon. Dr. Maxwell is extremely conscientious. I know I’m in good hands.”

Ultimately Dr. Maxwell needed to perform a laparoscopic total abdominal colectomy. “He was there when I woke up,” says Mr. Benko “with the good (and bad) news,” that he had been able to stop the bleeding and save Mr. Benko’s life, but removing the entire colon required an oncoplastic—procedure that brings the intestine to the surface of the abdomen, to emit intestinal waste. “A small price to pay to be alive,” says Mr. Benko. Three months later Dr. Maxwell performed another surgery to close and reattach the intestine. Despite some complications, which required a third procedure, Mr. Benko is extremely grateful for the care he received. “I chose the right surgeon,” he says. “Dr. Maxwell is extremely conscientious. I know I’m in good hands, and I’m determined to get myself better with his help.” While Mr. Benko sees an internist and other specialists closer to his home near Toms River, he says he will always make the trip to Philadelphia to see his surgeon of choice.

Read more about Gene Benko’s story at www.jeffersonhospital.org/genebenko

Officers of the Gibbon Surgical Society stand in front of the portrait of John H. Gibbon Jr., MD hanging in 620 Curtis. Pictured from left to right: Jordan Bloom, President; Rachel Chory, Technical Skills Coordinator; and Patrick Hartendorp, Education Coordinator. 

I know so many students who speak highly of Dr. Maxwell. We are fortunate to have him serve as the faculty advisor to our society. The students on his service love him. He goes out of his way to bring students into a surgical case and make sure that every student feels that his or her involvement matters to the team. He offers a lot of positive reinforcement and hope to create incredible opportunities for the many Jefferson students considering a surgical career.

At our first Gibbon Society meeting of the year, he gave out his cell phone number to a handful of newly elected students but it’s just not, inviting us to contact him any time. As we plan the year’s activities, he’s always available—even on weekends—to answer questions or offer advice. Because he is so generous with his time and expertise, the students feel tremendously happy access to a surgeon of his caliber. –Jordan Bloom, AMC Class of 2011

The Gibbon Surgical Society promotes surgery in medical students on campus through lectures and events. John H. Gibbon Jr., MD, professor and chairman of surgery (1924-1967), is recognized in medical history as the inventor of the heart-lung machine, which made possible the world’s first successful open heart operation at Jefferson in 1962. Dr. Gibbon focused international attention on Jefferson by ushering in a new era of cardiac surgery.

Back to page 1

In this issue

Clinical Integration

Vascular Center – Page 2

Changing Lives

Through Research

Dr. Berger – Page 3

On the Job

Joe Cozzolotto – Page 3

THOMAS JEFFERSON UNIVERSITY AND HOSPITALS
Since the Jefferson Vascular Center was launched in July 2009, this comprehensive program has been co-directed by Paul J. DiMuzio, MD, FACS, the William M. Meany Professor of Surgery and Director of the Division of Vascular and Endovascular Surgery. The co-directors are Gene Mark, MD, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of Thomas Jefferson University Hospital (TJUH), and Laurence Needleman, MD, Associate Professor of Radiology and Director of the Division of Abdominal Imaging.

DiMuzio says, “from a team of nationally and internationally recognized leaders in vascular care, research and education.” From an arterial standpoint, the center specializes in carotid artery disease, aortic aneurysm and dissection, and the minimally invasive treatment of lower extremity atherosclerosis. The physicians also evaluate and treat all forms of venous disease, including performing minimally invasive procedures for various veins right in the office as well as comprehensive evaluation and management of thrombotic disorders. Additionally, the center includes a comprehensive, on-site wound care program centered on hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

The center’s team of physicians currently sees close to one hundred patients a week, and for that past year Dr. DiMuzio and Joshua Eisenberg, MD, FACS, have performed roughly 80 vascular procedures a month. The center’s capacity has expanded even further with the recruitment of a third vascular surgeon, Abel Rau, MD, in August 2010.

“This full implementation of the Electronic Medical Record (EMR) system has been a tremendous asset as well,” says Dr. DiMuzio. “We can handle a higher volume of patients and patient satisfaction has been excellent.” The facility, located on the sixth floor of the Gibbon Building at Jefferson, houses the offices of all six physicians, eight exam rooms, three fully equipped ultrasound rooms, and the hyperbaric oxygen unit. Dr. DiMuzio adds that “the difference it has made in our patients’ experience is quite noticeable.”

Read more about the Jefferson Vascular Center at www.jeffersonhospital.org/vc.
Dr. Adam Berger Heads New Section of Surgical Oncology

Adam Berger, MD, FACS has been named Chief of the new Section of Surgical Oncology in the Department of Surgery. The section’s specialty overlaps with several divisions in the Department of Surgery and therefore includes surgeons specializing in many areas, including pancreatic cancer, breast cancer, and thyroid cancer.

“So far, five out of eight patients in our current trial have had pathologically complete responses”

Dr. Berger is heading the new Section of Surgical Oncology at Jefferson in Center City while working to expand oncology services to Northeast Philadelphia through Nazareth Hospital. At the same time, he is working on formulating a curriculum and continuing his work on clinical trials for cancer research.

A second trial for which Dr. Berger is a PI studies the use of a new drug, ZD6474— in combination with chemotherapy and radiation prior to surgery for patients with esophageal cancer. Dr. Berger conceptualized and designed the study in consultation with AstraZeneca. "Most trials report a pathologically complete response rate of about 20 percent," says Dr. Berger. "So far, five out of eight patients (62.5 percent) in our current trial have had pathologically complete responses—meaning the tumor has been entirely eliminated—which is very encouraging." Dr. Berger is also a surgical co-investigator for a multi-institutional study of two surgical techniques for pancreatic, biliary and related cancers. Dr. Yeo thought my experience was a good fit for Dr. Jonathan Brody, who was interested in pancreatic cancer. That was in 2006, and I’ve been commuting from my home in South Brunswick, NJ, ever since.

Dr. Berger notes, “Our goal is to reach surrounding communities.”

Changing Lives Through Research

Joseph Cozzitorto is a Research Associate at the Jefferson Center for Pancreatic, Biliary and Related Cancers.

How did you come to work at Jefferson?

My wife, Ellen, had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and so we were in Princeton recommended that we came to Jefferson for her surgery. I had worked for 25 years in the field of molecular biology, so during one of our visits, I inquired whether the department was doing any research. Dr. Yeo thought my experience was a good fit for Dr. Joseph Cozzitorto, who was about to establish a new lab dedicated to pancreatic cancer. That was in 2006, and I’ve been commuting from my home in South Brunswick, NJ, ever since.

What did your prior experience involve?

I did Plant Molecular Biology, while working for EnCharm, a Canadian startup company and American Cyanamid Corporation, which specializes in agricultural chemistry. At American Cyanamid I isolated genes of agronomic interest and generated mutations that would allow plants to survive in the presence of herbicide. I had also drawn biomedical and basic research in academia and for other companies in molecular biology. The way I look at it is that every job I’ve had was a preparation for the work I do now.

What do you do in Dr. Brody’s lab?

I do cloning work, which involves inserting certain genes from cultures of mammalian cells or clinical samples of patient tumors and inserting them into plasmids so that they can be used in experiments. We also investigate drug activity in cultured cells that have been treated with these genes. I have co-authored several articles on our findings. I also manage the lab, which includes two residents, a PhD investigator, a research assistant, and a graduate student. As the lab’s Principal Investigator, Dr. Brody always has creative ideas for experiments that keep the projects moving forward. It’s a very team-oriented environment.

For an appointment with a Jefferson Surgeon, call 1-800-JEFF-NOW

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The Kristen Olewine Milke Breast Cancer Research Fund

When Kristen Olewine Milke, a Harrisburg native, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003, she sought the best place to have her surgery. Her nephew, a surgeon at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, told her she would receive excellent care at Jefferson, and she soon became the patient of breast surgeon Dr. Ronald Weigel (currently the Head of Surgery at the University of Iowa) and Clinical Associate Professor Steven Copit, MD, who performed her reconstructive surgery.

“I became very close to the doctors who treated me,” says Ms. Olewine Milke. “This was before the Breast Care Center had been formalized, but I received that same thoughtful, coordinated care—where the oncologists, surgeons, chemotherapy treatments, and nursing care were all seamless. I realized I wanted to do more, to have an impact on others’ lives.”

Ms. Olewine Milke learned about the breast cancer research that Dr. Weigel was then doing, a role that ultimately bought by the Sysco Corporation. He turns 89 years old in October and continues to go to the office each day. Ms. Olewine Milke was Senior Vice President of Sysco Food Services of Central Pennsylvania until 2005, when she retired to devote herself full-time to philanthropic work. Jefferson is still involved in Ms. Olewine Milke’s care seven years later. “Were I to need surgery again, I would seek out Dr. Copit first and foremost,” she says. “To be near, I am glad to support Jefferson in seeking the best possible ways to meet the needs of breast cancer patients.”

For additional information about planned giving, or to make a contribution to the Department of Surgery, please contact Lara Goldstein in the Jefferson Development Office at 215-955-8797 or lara.goldstein@jefferson.edu.

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Jefferson University and Thomas Jefferson University Hospital. Author: Jennifer Brumbaugh, MA, Editor-in-Chief

News in Brief

Alex C. Beekley, MD, FACS, has joined the Division of Acute Care Surgery. Until recently, Dr. Beekley served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army Medical Corps stationed at Madigan Army Medical Center in Ft. Lewis, Washington. He served as a staff surgeon in both Afghanistan and Iraq. His focus will be acute care and burn surgery.

Jennifer Brook, PhD, has been named the Director of the Division of Surgical Research. Her research focuses on pancreatic cancer and targeted therapies.

Nicholas Cavoschi, MD, FACS, has joined the Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery. Most recently, he served as Director of the Heart Transplant Program and the Co-Director of the Heart and Vascular Intensive Care Unit at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. He will serve as the Director of the Surgical Critical Care Unit.

Dr. Steven Copit, Eugene Kennedy, and Francis Rosato, Jr. each received the Dean’s Award for Excellence in Education and Dr. Gerald Isenberg and Barry Mann received the Dean’s Citation for Faculty Mentoring at this year’s Faculty Awards Dinner.

George J. Keong Jr., DO, has joined the Division of Acute Care Surgery. Dr. Keong recently completed a fellowship in Critical Care and Acute Care Surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. He will provide care at both Jefferson University Hospital and the outreach trauma program at Paoli Hospital.

Stacey Milan, MD, a 2009 graduate of the residency program, has joined the Division of General Surgery. Dr. Milan recently completed a fellowship in Endocrine Surgery at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Her primary focus will be endocrine surgery.

Abd S. Rax, MD, a 2008 graduate of the residency program, has joined the Division of Vascular and Endovascular Surgery. Dr. Rax recently completed a two-year fellowship in Vascular Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. He will provide care at both Jefferson University Hospital and Methodist Hospital.

Charles J. Yeo, MD, FACS, recently performed his 1,000th Whipple procedure—typically performed to treat malignant tumors involving the pancreas, common bile duct or duodenum. Only one other surgeon in the United States has reached this milestone for this procedure.

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