

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

For Some, Dermatology Is All in the Family

As young kids, Bonnie Barsky and her older brother, Gary, spent countless hours at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, where their father Sidney chaired the department of dermatology for 21 years.

"If we were going to go to the city to see a movie he'd stop in at Cook County Hospital and we'd be there awhile while he took care of things," recalled Dr. Bonnie Barsky, who is now a dermatologist in Highland Park, Ill.

"We were always welcome in his office," she remembers. "Not only is he a doctor, but also he's a teacher. He loves to teach, so he would always want to show us what he was doing. We were familiar with the milieu."

Dr. Gary Barsky, a dermatologist who practices in Elmhurst, Ill., remembers watching firsthand what the life of a dermatologist was like, how his father "ran an office, got along with people, and how to look at lesions, picking up dermatology principles as a teenager."

Those experiences were refreshing, Bonnie added, because many children never get the chance to encounter their parents' work environment. Working parents "disappear during the day and come back," she explained. "We would follow Dad on his pathway at times."

For Bonnie, interest in becoming a dermatologist "was always there subconsciously," because she and Gary were around the field so much. But she insists that her father and her late mother, who also was a physician, never pressured her to consider it as a career.

"Being a doctor was so much a part of the identity of my parents, I think I incorporated that into my own identity," Bonnie said. "When I went to medical school, I came up with the idea that I would be open and see if there were other fields that might interest me, but I always came back to dermatology."

Sidney, who still works at Cook County Hospital 3 days a week, recalls giving his children this advice: "Whatever you want to be, be it. But be good at it."

Not only did Bonnie and Gary Barsky ultimately choose careers in dermatology, they also studied at the same institutions as their father. All three earned their undergraduate degrees at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and their medical degrees at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The trio talks on the phone almost every day, and rarely does a conversation go by without discussing a matter related to dermatology. Gary described the relationship he shares with his father and sister as "unique and a privilege, because you can go by someone else's experience to help you," he said. "It's humbling because we understand each other, how we live, and what we do. Also, we can consult on various medical conditions and get one another's feedback. It takes years to master a field. It's an ongoing process."

Bonnie considers the chats with her brother and father an advantage, "because sometimes people who go into private practice become more isolated from their colleagues. Some of my dad's students will call him periodically when they're in practice to ask him things. I'm lucky because I have that advantage on an everyday basis, because I do talk to my dad every day."

Gary, who performs more laser and cosmetic procedures than his sister and father do, said that certain challenges come with following in his father's footsteps. "He has a very strong reputation and is well respected in the dermatology community," Gary said of his father. "He also has a strong knowledge of dermatology, so I work hard to try to approach that [level of] knowledge. That's the challenge."

Sidney, meanwhile, is grateful for the family ties to dermatology. "It's always nice when parents have more in common with their children than [they do] in general," he said. "Not only are we related but we also have a common enterprise, common interests. Many people have asked me, 'How did you do it? How did you get your children to have an interest in medicine?' I say, 'I don't know. I just have two great kids.'"



Dr. Gary Barsky (left), Dr. Bonnie Barsky, and Dr. Sidney Barsky have telephone consultations almost daily about matters related to their shared profession.

Blazing His Own Trail in Dermatology

Before Dr. Randall K. Roenigk began medical school, he was intent on avoiding dermatology altogether.

He'd been around it plenty as the son of Dr. Henry H. Roenigk Jr., the former chair of the department of dermatology at the Cleveland Clinic and Northwestern University, Chicago, who now practices in Scottsdale, Ariz.

"I wanted to maintain my independence. I wanted to do something different," recalled Dr. Roenigk, who chairs the department of dermatology at the Mayo Medical School, Rochester, Minn. "It was that rebellious thing that some kids go through. Maybe I was going through it at a later age."

He also had toyed with the idea of a career in business. In fact, he scored higher on the entrance exam for business school than he did on the entrance exam for medical school.

"At the time, my father tried to discourage me from going to medical school, because he thought that medicine was changing for the worse," Dr. Roenigk said.

"He thought that in the old days, when money was not an issue and doctors had complete autonomy, that was kind of the heyday of medicine, and he saw all the regulatory changes coming down the pike."

In perhaps another act of rebellion, the young Randall chose medical school over business school, and ultimately dermatology. "I realized that I shouldn't just try to go into something different just to be independent," he said. "I realized that dermatology was a pretty good specialty to go into."

After completing his dermatology residency and fellowship in dermatologic surgery and oncology, Dr. Roenigk took about 10 years to emerge from the prominent shadow of his father and establish his own name in the field.

"I've had lots of opportunities to get to know dermatologists and understand the specialty because of my experience

through him, but also, because he's so successful at what he does, sometimes I've had to carry his reputation with me," said Dr. Roenigk, who has spent his entire career at the Mayo Clinic.

"My impact on dermatology has been more in the area of accreditation and certification of our surgical training as well as the practice of skin cancer surgery and reconstruction."

The Roenigks have never practiced together, but last year, the third edition of their textbook, "Roenigk's Dermatologic Surgery: Current Techniques in Procedural Dermatology," was published by Taylor & Francis.

They've also organized numerous dermatologic conferences together over the years (the elder Dr. Roenigk is the founding director of Skin Disease Education Foundation), but they don't share the same practice style.

"My father has an uncanny ability at being an astute diagnostician, and he is able to adapt to new techniques better than anybody I know," said Dr. Roenigk, who also is a member of the American Board of Dermatology's Board of Directors and chairs the residency review committee for dermatology.

"He started out in a day when dermatology was predominantly medical, and he described many of the most severe medical conditions in dermatology. He went from medical procedures—which he still does—to cosmetic procedures. He did hair transplants. He started doing liposuction. He's done dermabrasion and laser."

"He's someone who's been able to adapt his practice style to the needs of the patient and change with the specialty. I would say that I have adapted, but that he is able to adapt more quickly and in a substantial way," Dr. Roenigk said.

His father, he noted, "likes people to think that I'm his younger brother, because he doesn't like to think that he's aging," and added, "He plans to work for another decade at least."



Dr. Randall K. Roenigk (right) credits his father, Dr. Henry H. Roenigk Jr., with being unusually adaptable to patient needs and to changes in dermatologic practice.

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau