

Alumni Profile: Jen Jen Yeh, MD

There comes a point when every aspiring surgeon must go from learning to doing. From simply reading about a procedure to actually holding the scalpel, making the cut, and improving a patient's life—right there on the operating table. For Jen Jen Yeh, MD, that point came during her general surgery residency at Boston Medical Center (BMC) from 1997 to 2003.

"Residency is always a seminal part of training to become a surgeon," says Dr. Yeh, now a professor in the Departments of Surgery and Pharmacology at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Medicine, Vice Chair of Research in the Department of Surgery, and Co-Director of Clinical Research at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center.

"When you're a medical student, you have these aspirations, this very idealistic perspective of what you think surgery is about. But it's not until training that you really understand the complexities of how to be a surgeon."

Technical know-how from a compassionate place

Of course, would-be surgeons have choices when it comes to training programs. But at BMC and the Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM), there is something particularly enriching and immersive about the experience, which is what made Dr. Yeh excited to match with the program after medical school at Johns Hopkins.

"The technical training was really phenomenal at BMC, and it prepared me to tackle complex surgeries," she says. "I felt like I had a lot of autonomy to think about medicine, but most importantly, BMC taught me the philosophy of taking really good care of patients, and of being a really good doctor overall." Not only did she learn the fundamentals of good doctoring, she did so within the context of care equity. That is, treating and working with people from all walks of life, regardless of their circumstances.

"One of the things I really valued from my experience was the fact that BMC took care of patients from all social and economic statuses," she says. "And that trickled back to the way we all worked together. The staff truly acted as a team, and that really resonated with me."

Launchpad for success

Those lessons served as a lifelong launchpad for Dr. Yeh's future successes, which have been ample on both the scientific bench and at the bedside. In addition to running a medical practice that specializes in endocrine diseases and pancreatic cancers, she has devoted her career to finding new genomic-based approaches for one of oncology's deadliest and toughest-to-treat diseases: pancreatic cancer.



Jen Jen Yeh, MD, completed her surgical residency at Boston Medical Center in 2003. She is now a professor in the Departments of Surgery and Pharmacology at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, and Vice Chair of Research in the Department of Surgery.

"I chose to focus on pancreatic cancer because I felt like it was an area in which we, as surgeons, were plateauing—not moving the needle far enough for our patients," she says. "I wanted to contribute to research by understanding the biology of pancreatic cancer and finding new ways to treat it, and I wanted to make a difference in the clinic by helping patients choose the best therapy for them."

Indeed, she's well on her way. Dr. Yeh's achievements include identifying new molecular subtypes of pancreatic cancer and helping develop a device to shrink pancreatic tumors via direct-to-tissue chemo infusion. You can find her work in the pages of *Nature Genetics* and *Science Translational Medicine*, among other journals. Just recently, she was named an Oliver Smithies Investigator (established in honor of the late Nobel Prize winner at UNC).

Phenomenal mentorship

Dr. Yeh's work amounts to quite an impressive CV, one made possible by a roster of esteemed physicians and mentors who encouraged, challenged, and defended her along the way. Chief among them—pun intended—was BMC's very own Bob Beazley, MD, FACS, now Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and an Emeritus Professor of Surgery. During Dr. Yeh's time at BMC, he was Chief of Surgical Oncology. "He continues to be a phenomenal mentor for me, and he's a great clinician, a great surgeon," she says. "He taught us the history behind surgery. I take everything I learned from him."

"The technical training was really phenomenal at BMC, and it prepared me to tackle complex surgeries. ... but most importantly, BMC taught me the philosophy of taking really good care of patients, and of being a really good doctor overall."

— Jen Jen Yeh, MD

Others shaped Dr. Yeh's experience at BMC in equally unique ways—like David McAneny, MD (now BMC's Vice Chair of Surgery and Professor of Surgery at BUSM). "He was only a junior attending when I was there, so he probably started just a few years before I came, but seeing his relationship with Dr. Beazley was a great experience for me on how to mentor others. Now, looking back, it taught me how to encourage and promote young faculty."

In fact, it was Dr. McAneny, together with Chair of Surgery Jennifer Tseng, MD, MPH, who invited Dr. Yeh back to BMC as a visiting professor in November 2018, an invitation she enthusiastically accepted. "It was fabulous to be able to participate in the students' day and their education," she says. "There were even a couple of attendings who were interns when I was a chief resident. It was great to go back and share memories with a lot of people who are still there, and to meet new people, too."

Multidisciplinary problem solving

The ability to return to her residency alma mater some two decades later as a visiting professor really signifies the full-circle path of Dr. Yeh's work. Not only is she an esteemed clinician and scientist, she's also a teacher—one who is particularly committed to helping the next generation find their own way at the crossroads of science and medicine.

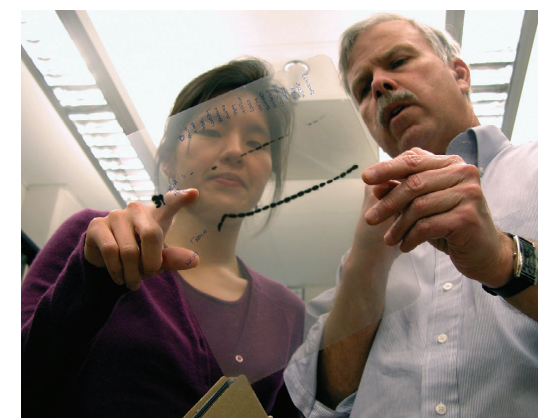
"Physician-scientists are really important, but fewer people are pursuing it because of the hurdles of balancing two careers," says Dr. Yeh, who organized a series of surgery–engineering speed dates at UNC to foster collaboration between researchers and physicians. "But we, as clinicians, aren't the only people who can solve clinical problems," she adds. "There are a lot of people who have different experiences, so I think multidisciplinary approaches from out-of-the-box areas can be really exciting."

A guiding force

As a teacher, one focus for Dr. Yeh is helping trainees home in on and then achieve their goals. "For me, it's most important to figure out what people's interests are," Dr. Yeh says. "And then it's about providing a roadmap on how to get there. I'd like to think I have a lot to teach based on my own hurdles and experiences—and that I can make things a little easier on future researchers and physicians by being there to help them."

And of course, that perspective is thanks in no small part to Dr. Yeh's time at BMC.

"I don't think that I could have gotten the quality of training that I got at any other program, or had the supportive faculty and role models that I found at BMC," she adds. "I feel very fortunate to have trained there."



Dr. Yeh confers with Al Baldwin, PhD, Associate Director for Basic Research at the University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center.