

Medical Class of 1972 Virtual Time Capsule

Transcript of Interview with Dr. Russell Emerson

Introductory Text:

McMaster University established the School of Medicine in 1966.

The Undergraduate Medical Program for the Doctor of Medicine Degree (MD) welcomed its first class in 1969 and they graduated in 1972. In 2022, MD '72 marked the 50th anniversary of their convocation.

During that time, we recorded interviews with members of that class in which they discussed their reason for choosing McMaster University, memories of their experiences in the program, and their career achievements that followed.

Question:

Before choosing McMaster what was your background and what made you pick McMaster University?

Dr. Russell Emerson:

From high school, I was not sure what I was going to do, but I knew I was good in math and science, so I applied to engineering at U of T and was accepted there. But then subsequently, won a governor's scholarship at McMaster, which gave me free tuition as well as a couple of other scholarships. So, since money was tight, I stayed at home and applied for engineering and got into engineering McMaster. The first week of lectures, the dean of science called me down to his office and we had a chat and he wondered what I was going to do with the rest of my life. And I said I wasn't really sure, but I knew I was pretty good in math, so I just enrolled in engineering. He encouraged me to go into natural sciences since I took basically all the same engineering classes, but it gave me more options. So, I transferred over to natural science and in year two went into honors biology.

My family doctor, coincidentally, had me tutor his son in math. So, his son really never did take off in math, but I got to know my family doctor a lot better who encouraged me to go into medicine. So, in third year I applied to several different medical schools, and was accepted pretty well everywhere, at Western, and U of T, and Queens. And McMaster intrigued me because we were getting lectures in cell biology from some of the professors at McMaster, and it was really Frank Lewis who encouraged me to go to Mac and I'm glad he did. It turned out to be a great decision.

Question: What are your strongest memories of McMaster? Tell me about your mentors, how successful the program was in setting you up for your career (including how the experience might have been improved)?

Dr. Russell Emerson:

So my experience at McMaster was terrific. We all were pioneers and my strongest memory is starting off in Chedoke in a little lab with the cadavers down the middle, separating the room in the two halves, 10 on each side with our little desks. And we were feeling it out and constantly interacting with various members of the faculty who'd come by and ask us how we were doing. We had at one point to tell Jim Anderson that we felt like we were in a goldfish bowl. All the visitors we got asking us how we thought the program was going and what we were doing. It was hard to get anything done. But Jim was very hands-on in the first phase and got everybody feeling comfortable and got us interacting.

The strong point of McMaster was, not so much learning from the faculty as learning from each other, which set us up for life to lifetime learning. The problem solving approach was really fascinating. I developed a particular bond, as many of my other fellow students did, with Jim Anderson and Frank Lewis was very hands-on and getting us feeling comfortable. My horizontal advisor was Bill Walsh. He was my guidance counselor as it were through the three years of medical school and was very helpful.

I did an elective in transplantation basically with John Bienenstock and that was a lot of fun as well. I mean everybody at Mac on faculty-wise and student-wise was there to make sure that we were successful. And we contributed and they contributed to us. We had an education committee that included faculty and students to improve the program as we went along, and the feedback was constant both ways, which was great.

Question:

Tell us about your career(s), and how you decided which medical paths to take or avoid, academic articles you wrote, other medical accolades and awards, etc.

Dr. Russell Emerson:

At one point in my undergrad, I was strongly leaning towards going into orthopedics. And I did a man-based elective, which was very interesting, very educational and very stimulating with Michael Harrison, who was a super orthopedist, very personable and an excellent teacher. But I remember I was on call with him one weekend and it was a wintry weekend. It was slippery and icy, and we had several people come in with fractured hips, little old ladies with broken hips.

So, Friday night, we were doing procedures on them, doing hip replacements, and the first couple I was assisting him and by the end of the weekend he was assisting me. And I thought, if I'm going to be doing this for the next 30 years, this is going to get really boring. And I enjoyed every rotation I was on during my clerkship, but the one that had me doing everything was family practice. So, I talked to my family doc about it and he really encouraged me to pursue that. So I ended up going into family practice, not necessarily by default, but I viewed it as a challenge to be able to do everything, obstetrics, pediatrics, assisting at surgery, doing the orthopedics that I liked.

So, it really encompassed everything and I'm glad I did. It really turned out to be a really good fit for me. When I graduated and finished my residency, I went into general practice in Woodstock with a classmate of mine, Bob Jones, and I was there for 20 years. I did the usual departments and chairmanships and stuff. I was chief of staff there for four years. And in the '92 I moved to the U.S. because I thought I was fed up with socialized medicine and thought I needed a different challenge. So, I moved to Gastonia to a 250 bed hospital with large medical staff and that's where I retired from. I was chief of staff there for a couple years and then became medical director of our physician network and retired from there about six years ago.

Question:

Now for your life since medical school, what experiences do you look back on now and reminisce?

Dr. Russell Emerson:

The thing that was really, really good about Mac was from day one, we were involved with patient care. I was shy going into medical school and the way that our plenary sessions were set up and our small group tutorials, it really encouraged interaction and expressing yourself and the program patients got you comfortable with patients without actually worrying about killing someone. So, it turned out to be an excellent experience. We had a lot of freedom to move around the city and do different things, and I spent a lot of time hanging around the emergency departments, latch onto a resident who was a good teacher and go around with him and learn a lot of stuff. So, the thing I remember most was the amount of patient interaction we had, compared to colleagues I've talked to since medical school who basically had virtually no patient interaction until they were in their internship clerkship years.

Question:

Do you think that your being part of the first MD class at McMaster has had a ripple effect on future classes and the University?

Dr. Russell Emerson:

That's hard for me to answer because I haven't really been involved in McMaster classes other than the two that were immediately after us. I know that we strongly resisted written tests. I remember at one point in the second phase, I think, one of the phase chairmen wanted to give us a test and we all revolted and walked out. We just told him that wasn't the McMaster way. I don't know if it's still a McMaster way. But as long as we learned the basic objectives of whatever unit we were in, we were free to explore things that we were interested in to the depth that we wanted to, which I think really helped the way that I practiced in the future. I'm not sure, I can't really say whether that's the way that McMaster behaves now because I'm not involved with the program at all.

Question:

Do you have any family that have chosen the path of medicine?

Dr. Russell Emerson:

I have my oldest daughter who went into nursing school and she became a nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit, which surprised me because when she was a kid, she used to faint at the sight of blood. I mean of all the things that I used to do as a physician delivering babies and whatever, the thing that scared me the most was a newborn. It blew me away that she's looking after these two and three pound babies and not thinking anything of it.

Closing text:

Thank you, Dr. Emerson!