

DONOR PROFILE

MATTERS OF THE HEART:

Deborah Tuttle, M.D., MCP '82



“Everybody has a different path ... sometimes you don’t end up where you think you will.” Deborah Tuttle, M.D., MCP '82, is speaking of her professional journey from that of an undergrad envisioning a career as a research scientist to her current life as a neonatologist in Newark, Delaware. Yet, she could also be speaking of her journey as a visionary alumna, a path that deeply incorporates who she is as a daughter and as a physician.

Several years ago, Tuttle experienced something with which many people are familiar: Her parents were getting older, and their overall health seemed to be faltering. “My parents both got what I thought was good medical care,” she relates. She also believed she was “asking the right questions” of their care team. Despite this attentiveness, “things were missed.”

Around 2003, Tuttle’s father, Charles, a very active, energetic man, began to slow

down. His doctor attributed it to lifestyle changes – he and his wife had recently moved to a smaller home – and a possibly related depression. His labs and EKG were normal. About four months after this consultation, though, his wife noticed he was very pale. The ER documented an irregular pulse and recommended an outpatient cardiac evaluation.

Scheduling a cardiology appointment near their home in Lancaster proved difficult. Charles was finally able to consult with a cardiologist in Delaware, who diagnosed his ischemia. Treatment began immediately, but doctors revealed he was a “massive heart attack waiting to happen.” When Tuttle spoke with her father’s internist, he said, “Wow. I would never have thought [he had ischemia]. He never had chest pain. He’s not a smoker. He’s active.” Tuttle suggests that many physicians were trained to see heart disease in this way.

Tuttle's mother, Kathryn, passed away in 2010 of decompensated aortic valve disease. Kathryn had been confined to a wheelchair, so she already experienced some general weakness and mobility issues. When she began to complain of fatigue, again the answer came back: depression. Tuttle says that the fatigue greatly compounded her mother's health problems because she was not getting out of bed. This led to a pressure wound on her ankle, for which she needed hospitalization. The hospitalization, in turn, required antibiotics. This chain of events "really did affect her quality of life."

Kathryn did receive an echocardiogram, but, as Tuttle explains, "I think the people caring for her just didn't understand the significance of the echo, didn't think a cardiologist needed to be involved. By the time it was clear what was going on, it was too late to be able to replace her valve." If her mother's heart disease had been correctly diagnosed, "at least people wouldn't have been trying to medicate her with more and more psychoactive drugs, which made her less communicative. It really was limiting," she says of her mother's final weeks.

In 2012, Tuttle and her husband, John Piper, M.D., MCP '83, made a generous gift to create two funds. One is The Kathryn J. and Charles B. Tuttle Lectureship Fund for cardiology. The lectureship honors Tuttle's parents. It also gives physicians access to much-needed educational opportunities.

Considering her parents' experiences with undiagnosed heart disease, Tuttle believed "something good should be able to come out of that." Their doctors were doing their best but were unable to see the symptoms of heart disease. "The best thing you can do in that situation is to try and help people learn," she surmises. The Tuttle Lectureship Fund aims to do just that.

The lecture is open to everyone in the College of Medicine community. In 2012, its inaugural year, the speaker was Patrick T. O'Gara, M.D., of Brigham and Women's Hospital, a world expert on aortic valve disease.

Tuttle and her husband also created The Deborah Jane Tuttle, M.D. '82 and John P. Piper, M.D. '83 Endowed Scholarship Fund. While they both had benefited from the Armed Forces Health Professional

Scholarship Program, joining the Air Force to help fund their education, Tuttle acknowledges that the military isn't for everyone. "My husband and I want to make medical school more affordable and support young doctors," she says. "What we're doing is a small piece of what people need, but at least it's a start."

Tuttle says she is "indebted" for her education at MCP. "It put me on the right path. It got me to where I am today," she observes. "What people have to realize is how much of a difference you can make, even with what you might think is not a large, million dollar donation. It helps me feel connected to a new generation of physicians."

Admittedly, Tuttle was not as connected to the school during its upheaval with Allegheny Health System. She questioned whether they were being good stewards of her time and money. For her, though, "Drexel did such a good job turning that around." Citing various factors, such as the scholarship luncheons, CME, and Simulation Lab, she says, "I see how hard people have been working to make the school a leader." The students and residents she encounters in her practice

are well prepared. "That makes me feel good and makes me want to continue to support the College."

Tuttle had always wanted to give back, even as an undergraduate researcher. As a neonatologist and a former Air Force officer, she is able to do so in a meaningful way by working with military families at Dover Air Force Base. And with the Tuttle Lectureship Fund and the couple's scholarship fund, she has taken this altruism to another level. She and her husband have taken a family hardship and transformed it into something that will undoubtedly save lives in the future. ■

To learn about creating a scholarship or other fund, please contact Donna Frithsen at dgf37@drexel.edu or 215-255-7343.