

Richard P. Wenzel, MD

RECIPIENT OF THE 2010 MAXWELL FINLAND AWARD FOR
SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT

Physician, scientist, professor, writer and philanthropic leader Richard P. Wenzel is the recipient of the 2010 Maxwell Finland Award for Scientific Achievement. An internationally renowned expert on antibiotic resistance and its impact, Dr. Wenzel has concentrated on the prevention and control of hospital-acquired infections, especially those

health or academic environments. In addition, Dr. Wenzel spurred national debate on the country's earlier smallpox preparation.

Born in 1940, Richard Wenzel grew up in Philadelphia. His father served in the Navy during World War II, and then became a stockbroker. His mother had her hands full raising Wenzel and his three siblings.

His work transformed hospital epidemiology and revolutionized the thinking about the increased mortality of

of the bloodstream causing sepsis. "Dr. Wenzel has been a global pioneer, adding scientific rigor and creativity to infection control," says Jerome F. Strauss III, M.D., Ph.D., executive vice president for Medical Affairs of Virginia Commonwealth University's Health System and dean of the university's medical school. "His stringent epidemiological methods have yielded path-breaking insights to the control of hospital infections." Here is a list of Dick Wenzel's firsts: He was the first researcher to define the epidemiology of the Systemic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (SIRS). He was the first to organize a statewide program that monitored nosocomial infections. And he was the prime mover of the national bloodstream monitoring program called SCOPE, Surveillance and Control of Pathogens of Epidemiological Importance. Over the years, Dr. Wenzel has spread his wealth of knowledge. He has trained more than 50 fellows. According to Dr. Strauss, 85 percent of them are in public

A defining moment for Dick Wenzel: On the first day of summer vacation in third grade, "I fell from a tree," recalls Dr. Wenzel, "fracturing my femur. During hospitalization I had a Kirschner wire placed through the thigh to hold the bone in place, and the wire was attached to a pulley and weights."

During his stay in the hospital, Dr. Wenzel says, "I developed a hospital-acquired *Staphylococcus aureus* infection at the entrance site of the wire, extending my stay for three additional weeks. My interest in medicine began at age 8 from this experience in the hospital."

In 1961, Dr. Wenzel graduated from Haverford College and entered the Jefferson Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. "My microbiology professor at Jefferson, Ken Goodner, sent me to the Philippines for three months at the end of my junior year," he says. While there, Dr. Wenzel saw and helped treat 100 cholera

patients a day. “I fell in love with international medicine,” he says of the experience.

In his second year of residency at the University of Maryland, Dr. Wenzel was sent to Bangladesh. “There over a 3-month period I saw 50 cases of cholera a day during their epidemic, plus other causes of tropical diseases, and also saw many cases of smallpox,” he says. “My interest in global health was solidified at this time.”

In 1972 Dr. Wenzel was hired as assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Virginia. He was also recruited to do studies of respiratory viruses. To help cover departmental salary expenses, he was also asked to be the hospital’s first

nosocomial infections.

hospital epidemiologist. “I asked what my duties would be,” Dr. Wenzel remembers, “but no one was sure. However, I was told that there had been an outbreak of infections on orthopedics and the hospital wanted someone dedicated to this problem. Thus, serendipity led me to a new field and an exciting career.”

At the University of Virginia, Dr. Wenzel eventually became a professor of internal medicine and from 1981 to 1986 served as the founding chair of the university’s Master of Science Degree Granting Program in Hospital Epidemiology.

Between 1986 and 1995, he was professor of Medicine and Preventive Medicine at The University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City. “My Chairman of Medicine at the University of Iowa, Frank Abboud, believed in academic ex-

cellence and in scholarship and was completely supportive of my work there building an internationally recognized program on infection control,” Dr. Wenzel says. “His support was especially significant, since I was among a few in the department at the time not focused on biomedical, laboratory-based research.”

From 1995 to 2009, Dr. Wenzel was professor and chair of the department of Internal Medicine at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical College of Virginia. He has

also served as founder and director of the University’s Clinical Trials Institute and Outcomes Research Institute, as president of its Practice Plan of the Health System and as senior associate dean. Dr. Wenzel is the author of more than 500 manuscripts and half a dozen books, including a book of essays, *Stalking Microbes*, published in 2005. He has also written a medical thriller, *Labyrinth of Terror*, due out in 2010. Most of his writing is done, he says, “on the weekends or at 30,000 feet. In 1980, he founded the journal *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*. “His landmark papers on at-

tributable mortality, ground-breaking studies of risk factors and novel approaches to control,” Dr. Strauss says, “have transformed hospital epidemiology from description to a defined discipline. He has meticulously identified the incremental costs and impact of nosocomial infections, revolutionizing the thinking about the increased mortality of nosocomial infections: they are now widely recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others as equivalent to the eighth leading cause of death in the United States.”

To stem many nosocomial infections, Dr. Wenzel offers



this practical advice: “I advise physicians to wash their hands before touching any patient, to use check lists before inserting any device, to use isolation properly and to be ever cognizant of the need for infection control. I advise patients to tell any health care worker to wash their hands before



board of *The New England Journal of Medicine*. In 2001, he was named the periodical’s first Editor-at-Large. A member of the American Society of Clinical Investigation, the Association of American Physicians and a charter member of the Surgical Infections Society, he is also former president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the International Society of Infectious Diseases.

“To say that Dick Wenzel enjoys the respect of his peers is a gross understatement,” according to Dr. Robert C. Moellering, Jr. of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and recipient of NFIID’s 2006 Maxwell Finland Award. “His research and administrative activities over the years . . . are part of the reason for this. He is also a wonderful and

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touching them or any device on them.”

Among his many honors and recognitions are the 1994 Abbott Achievement Award for Outcomes Research from the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the 2008 Laureate Award from the American College of Physicians and Richmond Magazine’s Pioneer in Medicine Award.

From 1992 to 2000, Dr. Wenzel served on the editorial

generous teacher—as reflected in the numerous awards he has won over the years—and is an outstanding clinician who upholds the highest ethical standards of our profession. In sum, he is one of the giants of the academic medicine in the world. He has done everything: research, medical administration, teaching and clinical medicine, and he has excelled in every one of these disciplines.”

Today he lives in Richmond, Virginia, and still routinely puts in 12 hour days. His wife, Jo Gail, is a nurse, with a degree in Counseling. Dr. Wenzel says she is an expert cook and has published a cookbook. His daughter, Amy, is a full time Nurse Practitioner, also an excellent cook and has three young children. His son, Richard, is an expert cook as well and an assistant manager of a restaurant. When Dick Wenzel is not working, he exercises regularly, plays acoustic guitar, travels with Jo Gail, and enjoys time with their three grandchildren.