



Joseph B. Kirsner, MD, PhD, in his office at the Medical Center, where he still works twice a week. Photo by Bart Harris

by Susan Chandler

The Section of Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition at the University of Chicago Medical Center is world-renowned for its groundbreaking gastrointestinal research and its patient-centered care. Much of that is thanks to Joseph B. Kirsner, MD, PhD, who has spent the last seven decades building the program and raising awareness of debilitating digestive diseases such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

Kirsner, who celebrated his 100th birthday in September, also has been a major force in raising money for research into inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and is the force behind the founding of the Gastro-Intestinal Research Foundation. The foundation provides funding for equipment and laboratories, and supports investigators and young physicians in the Medical Center's Section of Gastroenterology, which has been consistently ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top 10 in the country.

Because of his dedication and longevity, Kirsner has mentored and trained generations of new gastrointestinal (GI) specialists. One sign of how the field has progressed: the Medical Center's gastroenterology training program receives about 400 applications a year for three to four fellowship positions, which are supported by the National Institutes of Health. David Rubin, MD, co-director of the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center and one of Kirsner's proteges, says a three-part focus on research, training and patient care is what Kirsner is renowned for. "He insisted on the highest quality research with patient-centric goals in mind. There was always a clinical question tied to a patient problem that led to specific research in the field," said Rubin.

Despite the diligent efforts of Kirsner and others to crack the code, there is still no cure for Crohn's or ulcerative colitis and the cause of intestinal bowel disease remains a mystery. "The problem is still unsolved," Kirsner said. "We need to do more research."

Even so, Kirsner has seen major progress in a once obscure field of medicine that wasn't recognized as a separate specialty. He still remembers an emaciated young woman who showed up at the beginning of his work at the University of Chicago in 1936. All they could do was give her fluids and nutrition. The woman soon died. Today, treatments range from surgery to genetically engineered treatments such as infliximab (Remicade), and many IBD patients can live virtually normal lives, despite the chronic nature of their conditions.

Kirsner didn't have those tools available to him when he traveled to Chicago from Boston to intern at Woodlawn Hospital on the South Side. There he met his future wife, Minnie, and decided to make Chicago his home. After he moved to the university, he began to be mentored by Walter Palmer, MD, an expert in peptic ulcers.

Back then, inflammatory bowel disease was largely viewed as a psychiatric disorder aggravated by stress. Kirsner initially accepted the prevailing view, but his tours of duty as a doctor in the Army Medical Corps in Europe and the Pacific during World War II changed that.

Surely the stress of war and deprivation would have contributed to an increase in ulcerative colitis, he reasoned. But Kirsner came across only a few cases. "I didn't see ulcerative colitis after Normandy. When we liberated the Philippines, I didn't see it. There was obviously more to it than nerves," he said.

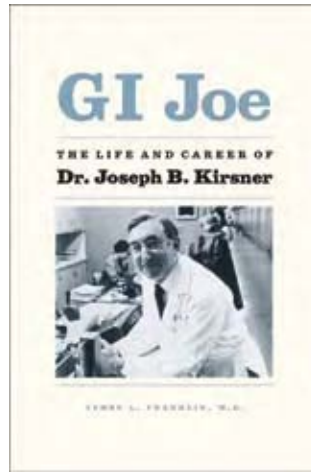
When Kirsner came home from the war, he returned to his grueling seven-day-a-week schedule of research, hospital rounds

and patient clinics. Palmer remained primarily interested in peptic ulcers and stomach acid levels. Kirsner was more interested in intestinal bowel disease.

Research out of Australia tying peptic ulcers to spiral bacteria would eventually prove that Kirsner had latched on to the more intractable problem. Since ulcers have been treated with antibiotics, they largely have gone away. Not so with ulcerative colitis and Crohn's, which is on the rise for reasons that aren't completely understood.

Kirsner, who took over as head of the GI section in 1962, reigned for decades as one of the world's leading specialists in digestive diseases. He wrote more than 800 papers and traveled to Morocco 55 times to treat King Hassan II, who suffered from irritable bowel syndrome.

More than just the advances in treatment, Kirsner is proud of the way he and other Medical Center doctors treated patients as people, not just experimental subjects. He



Dr. Kirsner's friend and colleague, James L. Franklin, MD, authored this lively biography published in April 2009.

has long prided himself on being available to patients at any time of the day or night, giving them his home phone number. He still receives calls and visits from patients he treated 30 years ago.

"We became known for our compassionate care of the sick," Kirsner said. "Research is important but the combination of research and compassionate care is the best way. It still is the best way."

Since 2000, the Medical Center's GI section has been headed by Stephen Hanauer, MD, one of Kirsner's residents from the 1970s. Rubin and Russell Cohen, MD, are co-directors of the section's Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center. Even at 100 years old, Kirsner still comes into his Medical Center office two days a week.

"On this particular day, I'm not as well informed as Rubin, Hanauer and Cohen. I don't need to be," Kirsner said. "I always felt my responsibility was to leave a proper group of physicians to carry on and advance."



Joseph Kirsner, MD, PhD, and David Rubin, MD, still collaborate; here, the two are working together on a Grand Rounds lecture. Photo by Bart Harris

## A MENTOR AND A FRIEND

When David Rubin, MD, was heading to the Pritzker School of Medicine as a first-year student in 1990, his grandmother told him to look up her doctor, Joseph Kirsner, MD, PhD. "She said, 'Go see if my doctor is still there. He saved my life,'" Rubin recalls. When he asked her what Kirsner had treated her for, she replied Crohn's disease. It was the first time Rubin had heard of it.

He followed her instructions and boldly tracked Kirsner down in his office. Kirsner, who was then 80, was still keeping a heavy workload, treating patients and mentoring young physicians. He kept his eye on Rubin as his medical education progressed and when Rubin was considering specialties, Kirsner told him, "We need you in GI. Don't go into cardiology." Rubin followed his advice.

It was the beginning of a long relationship and deep friendship that continues today. Rubin is now co-director of the

Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center in the Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition Section at the Medical Center. When Kirsner stopped seeing patients in 2004, Rubin took over for him and became his personal physician as well.

Kirsner attended Rubin's wedding. Rubin visits Kirsner at his Hyde Park home on Sundays and often brings him breakfast. The two worked together on a Grand Rounds lecture that Kirsner presented September 8, two weeks before he became a centenarian.

"He has taught me the history of medicine and the special touches that make a difference in somebody's life," Rubin said. "He has taught me that being in a university is not just your career, it's your life. We'd like to think we're following in his footsteps every day, but there's only one JBK."