FROM CHOCOLATE AND CORNFIELDS
The History of Urology at Penn State Hershey Medical Center

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The Mid-Atlantic and New England sections of the American Urological Association are home to some of the oldest medical schools and urology programs in the country. Despite the fact that the Division of Urology at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center was established approximately 40 years ago, it carries with it a rich history. Built in the cornfields of central Pennsylvania, the history of Hershey would not be complete without exploring its chocolate roots.

It was in 1905 that candy manufacturer Milton Hershey decided to try adding chocolate coating to his caramels. Calling this new enterprise the Hershey Chocolate Company, he located it near the area he had been born, amid the rolling farmlands of Derry Township, PA. By the summer of 1907, with the milk from nearby dairy farms and the spirit of hard-working people from the region, the first batch of chocolate and other sweet confections was ready. Milton Hershey, who trained at the University of Pennsylvania, later said: “My own conclusion was that he [Milton Hershey] was so interested in relieving human suffering, that he would certainly approve an idea where we could have a fine medical school and teaching hospital here.” Once the Hershey Trust Board and the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Office agreed with the plan, Sam Hinkle made a phone call to Eric Walker, then President of Penn State University. The Hershey School Trust to The Pennsylvania State University for a medical school was completed in 1970. On August 23, 1963 The M.S. Hershey Foundation provided a $50 million endowment to the School Trust. In 1966, the first class of students enrolled at the Pennsylvania State University at the time the decision was made. The History of Urology at Penn State Hershey Medical Center was established.

Prior to the opening of the medical center, Dr. George T. Harrell, the founding dean, appointed Dr. Rohner as the first pediatric urologic surgeon from The University of Pennsylvania (PENN) to chair the newly formed Department of Surgery. In efforts to recruit additional surgeons, he called upon Dr. Thomas Rohner to head the Division of Urology. Dr. Rohner was also a full-time faculty appointment at the Hershey Medical Center. In 1967, he was appointed Dr. Decter as Chief of Urology in July 1970, at the age of 33 years old, he agreed to move to Hershey and also established the Division of Urology as Chief and Assistant Professor. The residency program expanded, so did the hospital. As a major medical school became more involved in administrative duties within the hospital, holding the positions of Chief of Staff, Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs, and Interim Chair of the Department of Surgery, subsequently appointed Dr. Decter as Chief of Urology in July of 1970. In 1988, Ross Decter, pediatric urologist, was appointed Interim Chief of Urology. After serving in that role for one year, Dr. Decter became the first recipient of this endowment in 2002.

Over the next decade, the program continued to grow. Additional faculty appointments were made to Drs. Mark Bellinger, Mark Janowski, John Belis, Ross Decter, and Deborah Erickson. In 1989, the residency program obtained approval to increase its training capacity to two residents per year. Four years later, the division first set two residents. George Bolwine and Louis Harpster, the latter would eventually return as a faculty member. In 1997, the program decreased the general surgical rotation requirements from two years to one, thus becoming a five-year program. In both 1990 and 1997, the Division of Urology earned a top 20 ranking from U.S. News & World Report.

As the residency program expanded, so did the hospital. At the Hershey Medical Center, there were 11 mid-level providers at the Penn State Hershey Medical Center, with an additional 13 clinical faculty at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown, PA, where residents spend six months of their training. Past residents have successfully placed in prestigious fellowship positions as well as a variety of private practice positions throughout the country.

Despite its recent origins, the Division of Urology at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center has risen from the cornfields to become a respected program, publishing significant clinical research articles and expanding its reach throughout the community. The Division continues to train new residents. The future remains bright as Dr. Decter leads the program into further growth and expansion, while always maintaining an emphasis on resident education.