



M A K I N G opportunities

E.L. Amidon Professor and Department of Medicine Chair
Polly Parsons, M.D., marks a decade of growth and innovation.

According to the old phrase, opportunity comes knocking every now and then. It's characteristic of a leader to welcome what that caller brings, and encourage future visits. As she looks back on ten years at the helm of the College of Medicine's Department of Medicine, Polly Parsons, M.D., can chart a lengthy list of both the opportunities that have presented themselves, and those she's found and invited in. In that time the department has flourished, with many new members, new innovative education initiatives led by faculty, and research across the department's eleven divisions that continues to make its mark nationally.

That is no small feat considering today's competitive research climate and the usual tug-and-pull clinician-scientists deal with when balancing careers in both patient care and research. For the Department of Medicine, this success has been built in large part on forging ahead into new territory.

Recruiting and retaining motivated and talented faculty members has led to a robust research program within her department. Despite the increased competition for decreasing research resources, her department's extramural research support has maintained an annual funding level of approximately \$20M per year for the last five years. Over the past decade, faculty have published over 300 manuscripts, reviews, chapters and books. Some travel the world for speaking engagements and to serve on high profile national committees. Parsons' goal is to foster a department that nurtures new talent, and stays nimble enough to respond to rapid change.

"If you provide the right environment, people will flourish."

— Polly Parsons, M.D.

"I believe that if you provide the right environment, people will flourish," she says.

the parsons file

Polly Parsons, M.D.

UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

E.L. Amidon Professor and Chair, Department of Medicine, UVM College of Medicine; and Leader, Medicine Health Care Service, University of Vermont Medical Center, 2006–Present

Interim Chair of Medicine, 2005–2006

Professor, Department of Medicine, 2000–2005.

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

Professor, Department of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, 1999–2000

Associate Professor, Department of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, 1992–1999

Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, 1986–1992

Instructor, Department of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, 1985–1986

• **National Heart, Lung and Blood Advisory Council** member, 2011–2014

• **American Thoracic Society**, Secretary-Treasurer, 2015–2016; will be President, 2018–2019

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Radcliffe College, Harvard University, A.B., Biology 1975

University of Arizona College of Medicine, M.D., 1978

Internship and Residency in Internal Medicine, University of Colorado Medical Center, 1978–1981

Research Fellow, National Jewish Hospital & Research Center, 1981–1982

Fellow, Pulmonary Medicine, University of Colorado Medical Center, 1982–1985

SELECTED HONORS

America's Top Doctors: 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011

US News & World Report: Top 1% Pulmonary Physicians in the US 2012

American Thoracic Society Elizabeth A. Rich, M.D. Award Recipient: 2006

Selected as the Who's Who in the American Thoracic Society for October 2006.

American Thoracic Society Distinguished Achievement Award: May 2013

The Path to Medicine

Coming to UVM was a sort of journey home for Parsons, though with a long detour in between. She was born in Dorset, Vt., but her father's career as a geologist kept her family on the move. They settled for a time in California and British Columbia, before they wound up in Bangor, Maine, where Parsons graduated from high school. She completed her undergraduate degree in biology at Radcliffe College. Medicine was one of several career options Parsons considered as an undergraduate at Radcliffe; for a time, she thought she would go to law school. She also considered a career as a field researcher in biology, but when she tried to picture living the life of legendary biologist Jane Goodall, it lacked the interaction with people she craved. Combining research and patient care seemed like an option that matched her scientific bent and desire to make a difference in the lives of patients. Volunteer work at a health clinic as an undergraduate sealed her decision.

She went west for medical school in 1975, to the University of Arizona College of Medicine. Although the program there had an outstanding reputation, the decision was in part pragmatic: Her parents were living there at the time. When she attended in the late 1970s the school had a three-year M.D. program, which she finished on time, despite a schedule she describes with a chuckle as "a little intense."

After graduating from medical school in 1978, she headed to the University of Colorado Medical Center for a residency in internal medicine. She then spent one year as a research fellow at the National Jewish Hospital and Research Center in Denver, followed by three years as a fellow in pulmonary medicine at University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, an institution that is world renowned for its leading-edge research in pulmonary and critical care medicine.

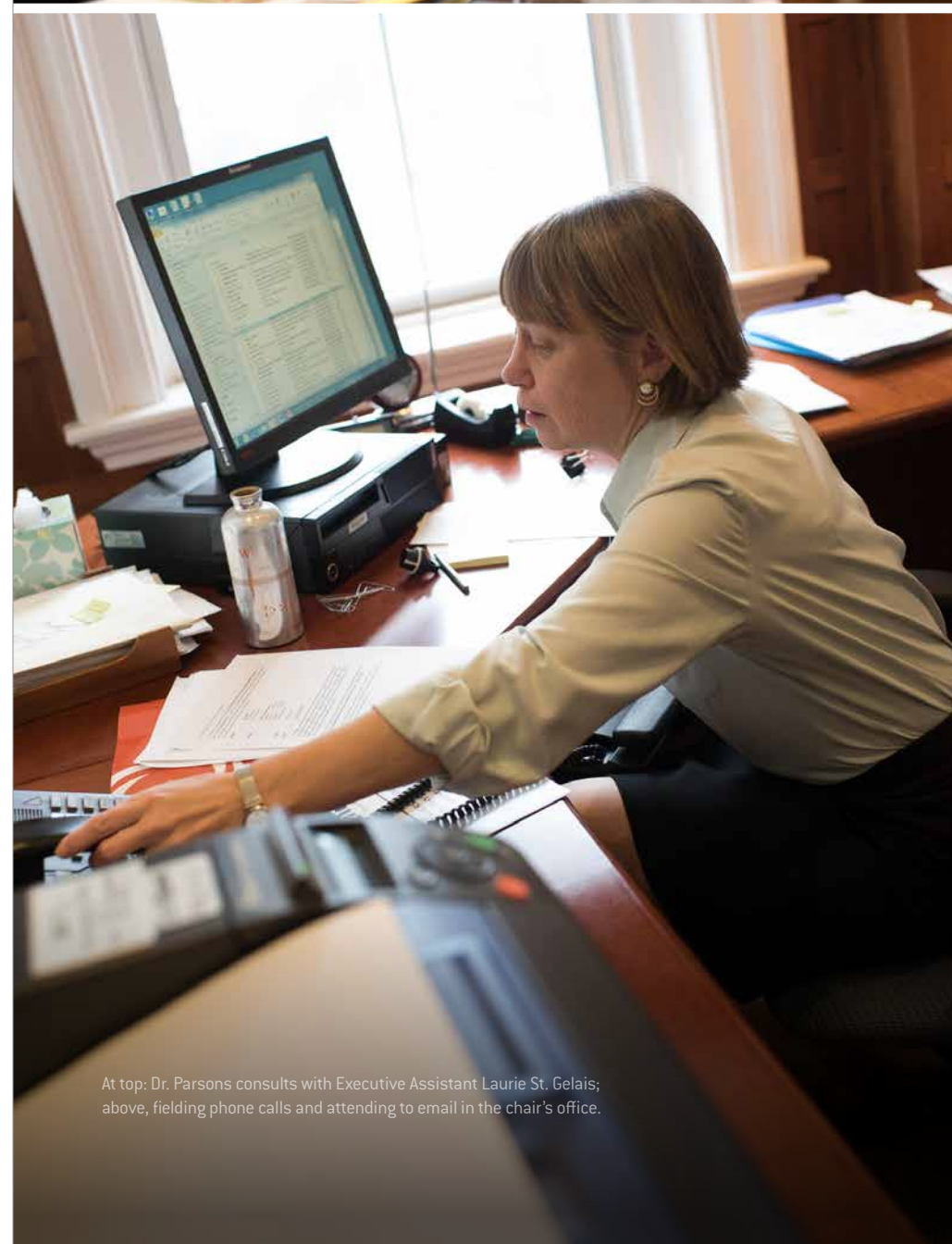
UVM Professor of Medicine Charles Irvin, Ph.D., who was on the faculty at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center when Parsons became a pulmonary fellow there, characterizes it as one of the most competitive programs in the country. In a field notoriously dominated by men, women were anomalies in such programs at that time.

"For her to get that fellowship put her apart from other people," Irvin says. "She distinguished herself in so many ways during that training."

Parsons joined the lab of Peter Henson, D.V.M., Ph.D., who had a robust research agenda related to the basic cell biology of acute lung injury. She soon found herself in the thick of what was then a new field: Translational research. Her dual skill set — as a clinician and researcher — put her in a prime position to excel and help shape the field. It also provided leadership opportunities when she was quite young — including running a project and a clinical core for a large NIH grant while still a very junior faculty member. She rose to the challenge. Says Parsons: "As an M.D. scientist, I was able to engage on the clinical side and I had the expertise in basic biology. It was a nice niche for me."

In 1985, she was invited to join the faculty at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. She also became a staff physician at Denver General Hospital (now Denver Health Medical Center), quickly rising through the ranks. By 1991, she was co-director of the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU), and took over as director of the MICU in 1993. She served in that role for seven years. Leading the intensive care unit for one of the major trauma centers in the country requires a certain knack for calm in the face of uncertainty, as well as a keen appreciation for colleagues' abilities. She found a strong team in Denver.

"Everyone in the hospital came together to make things happen," Parsons says. "It was a spectacular place to practice clinical medicine."



At top: Dr. Parsons consults with Executive Assistant Laurie St. Gelais; above, fielding phone calls and attending to email in the chair's office.

She juggled the clinical work with research demands in her professional life. On the personal side, she married fellow physician James Jacobson, M.D., in 1987. They welcomed their first child, a son named Alec, in 1990, followed by son Chandler in 1995. There may be shades of a woman bent on "having it all" in her story, but Parsons is quick to point out that her husband — a psychiatrist with an equally busy schedule — did just as much juggling of career and family life. Together, she said, they struck a balance.

Parsons' research quickly put her on the national stage. She played a key role in the National Institutes of Health-funded ARDS Network, a group focused on Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, a mysterious condition affecting mostly critical care patients. Through large, multi-center clinical trials, the network made important discoveries related to improving treatment and reducing mortality. Parsons worked on the pathogenesis committee, serving as chair from 1997 to 2006.

Through the ARDS Network she had the opportunity to collaborate with Michael Matthay, M.D., now a professor of medicine and anesthesia at the University of California at San Francisco, on dozens of studies over the years, including some important publications that identified biomarkers for acute lung injury and acute respiratory distress syndrome.

"Polly was a dynamic and bright force in the network," says Matthay, who points out that her influence has stretched over the course of two decades. "She was an excellent translational researcher before that term was widely used."

As she rose through the ranks, she also mentored younger researchers as they navigated their careers. Marc Moss, M.D., now a professor of medicine at the University of Colorado and section head of critical care medicine at the University of Colorado Medical Center, was one such mentee. He completed a pulmonary and critical care fellowship at the University of Colorado when Parsons was a faculty member there.

"That was 20 plus years ago, and [Parsons] is still an effective and approachable mentor for me," he says.

Not only has Parsons served as an important sounding board for scientific questions but, Moss points out, she also helped at a critical juncture in his career, when he was deciding whether to move back to Colorado after eleven years at Emory University. It was a big move for him and his family, and her ability to balance listening with some quiet encouragement helped him to decide to make the move.

“She’s a good motivator,” he says. “She’s inspirational in that way.”

Marvin Schwarz, M.D., now the James C. Campbell Professor of Pulmonary Medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and division head for pulmonary sciences and critical care medicine when Parsons was there, says she’s seen as an outstanding alum who in many ways helped to pave a path for women in the field by virtue of her career trajectory as a researcher, physician, and academic leader.

“We personally brag about Polly as being one of our graduates,” he says.

Building a Program in Vermont

When Dr. Charles Irvin came to the UVM College of Medicine in the late 1990s to help build the research program for the Vermont Lung Center, he found himself on the look-out for a new chief for the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine. The “ideal person” for the job immediately sprang to mind from his days at the University of Colorado. After a national search, Parsons rose to the top of the list, and she accepted the position as director of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the College in 2000.

“She’s the kind of leader who’s focused on the academic mission,” Irvin says. “And she’s always asking how people can contribute.”

Shortly after arriving in Vermont she set to work recruiting new faculty, infusing energy into the division. Of those early days at UVM, Parsons says she remembers meeting many enthusiastic physicians and researchers drawn to the institution for its outstanding reputation for research and patient care, as well as the tight knit



Associate Professor Renee Stapleton, M.D., Ph.D., right, recruited by Dr. Parsons in 2006, considers her a mentor to this day.

community. As word spread about the division, interest continued to grow, so much so that she created positions earlier than expected to accommodate some outstanding applicants.

Her young sons, Alec and Chandler, gamely played host to a “million other kids,” Parsons laughs, as potential faculty members visited with their own children. She gives her sons credit for their patience and ability to “schmooze” the youngest recruits.

The work paid off — 15 years later the pulmonary and critical care division has increased in size from a handful of faculty to 25. Also noteworthy: ten of those division members are women, a far cry from her days as a fellow in Colorado, when women were almost non-existent in the field.

New Challenges, New Opportunities

In 2005, then department chair Burton Sobel, M.D., stepped aside to concentrate on cardiovascular research, and Parsons was tapped as interim chair. After a year, she added her name as a candidate in the College’s national search. She was appointed E.L. Amidon Professor and Chair of Medicine in 2006. Parsons is part of a relatively small group of women leaders in medicine: According to a recent report from the Association of American

Medical Colleges, women held about 15 percent of department chair positions nationwide in 2013–2014, up from 10 percent one decade earlier. For internal medicine chairs, women hold just 12 percent of seats nationally.

“I can think of no better person to lead us than her.”

— Charles Irvin, Ph.D.

Parsons has made a point to foster the next generation of medical leaders. Renee Stapleton, M.D., Ph.D., met Parsons when she was a fellow in the University of Washington system, in part through a shared research focus on acute lung injury. Stapleton says she and her husband were looking to move out of Seattle to raise a family. UVM was at the top of the list, in part because of the chance to practice medicine at a top notch medical center in a city with a small community feeling, and in part because of Parsons’ research reputation. When the family came to visit Vermont in 2006, the welcoming atmosphere sealed the deal. Stapleton came with her infant daughter and husband in tow, and although Stapleton was ready for a challenge juggling her five month-old with meetings and appointments, Parsons

made it easier. “When your department chair picks up your baby, that’s a pretty good sign,” Stapleton laughs.

Now Parsons serves as a mentor for Stapleton, whose own career as a clinician scientist is flourishing. Stapleton has a robust research agenda related to sepsis in critically ill patients, supported in part by a four-year K23 grant from the NIH, and in 2014 won the Jo Rae Wright Award for Outstanding Science from the American Thoracic Society.

Parsons has been there as a crucial support: “She provides methodological insight but she’s also a great career mentor,” says Stapleton.

Anne Dixon, M.D., who inherited the division chief position from Parsons, says her leadership and service to the college continues to propel the department forward.

“She’s asking questions like: How do we leverage our expertise in translational medicine here? How do we enhance teaching at all levels?” says Dixon. “She really does understand the whole of the academic mission.”

Almost ten years into her tenure, Parsons says she has seen some promising changes when it comes to gender equity. At Radcliffe as an undergrad in the 1970s, she and her classmates had big goals, but encountered some pushback. “We were ready, but nobody told the world,” she says. “We had to let the world adapt.”

It has taken decades, but she sees signs that the world may be starting to catch up. Gone are the days of Parsons as the lone woman researcher: Now she sees the next generation of women here at UVM — like Stapleton, Dixon, and others — who are establishing careers and taking on leadership roles in significant numbers. And through her service on prestigious NIH review panels and national associations, she’s gone from a women’s caucus of, in some cases, one, to enough women to fill a board room. This year she is wrapping up a three-year term on the NIH’s National Heart, Lung and Blood Advisory Council, and this spring Parsons was elected secretary-treasurer of the American Thoracic Society (ATS) for

2015–2016. She will then assume the role of ATS president for the 2018–2019 term.

Adaptation & Innovation

Academic medicine faces some unique pressures at present, Parson notes, including more of an emphasis on the clinical side of the mission, in large part because of financial challenges facing medical centers nationwide. This means that as chair of a large and diverse department like medicine, she’s often faced with helping physicians continue to deliver excellent patient care while making sure education and research stay at the fore. Parsons says her approach is to adapt and innovate, and have an outstanding team of people ready to make new things happen.

“Things are changing really fast and in a lot of different ways,” she says. “Let’s put key pieces in place and be ready.”

SPARK VT is one such initiative, launched as a pilot in late 2012. Inspired by a program developed at Stanford University, SPARK VT asks faculty members for proposals aimed at translating novel ideas into therapies, diagnostics, or devices that could advance rapidly into clinical care through commercialization or other pathways. A panel of entrepreneurs evaluate the proposals, and winners receive


start-up funding and milestone evaluation by the panel. The first year SPARK VT awarded \$50,000 seed grants to two Department of Medicine faculty, and then expanded to two more departments in the UVM College of Medicine. Now, it is a University-wide program.

New education initiatives — including a masters of public health and two public health certificate programs — provide additional teaching opportunities for faculty, and multidisciplinary simulation-based education projects led by faculty are helping healthcare providers improve how they work together in settings like the intensive care unit. And then there’s the department’s pioneering work in high value cost conscious patient care, piloting multidisciplinary clinics and screening programs.

Parsons is stoic as she thinks of the road ahead: For many years she kept notepads at her desk with the Chinese symbol for “crisis” printed on them — a character that combines those of both “danger: and ‘opportunity.’”



“Seeing ‘opportunity’ at every turn in the road is easier when there’s a motivated and capable team with you moving forward,” she says.

Says her colleague Charles Irvin: “I can think of no better person to lead us than her. She’s the only person I’d want running the show.” 

Dr. Parsons leads her morning meeting — the weekly hour every Monday morning to touch base with division leaders in the Department of Medicine.

