

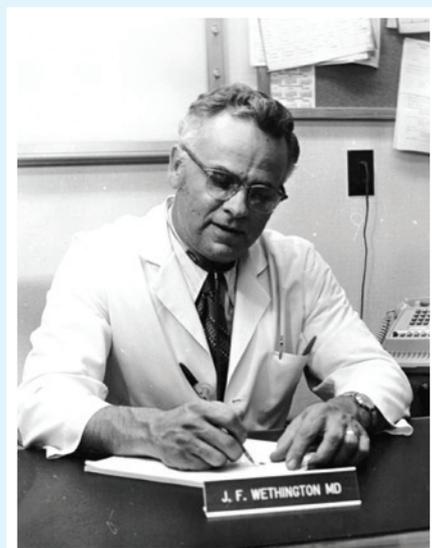
Those we've lost

BY SUZY FRISCH

Among the long list of Minnesotans who died from Covid-19 (nearly 8,000 as of mid-September) are physicians who spent decades working and leading in medicine.

As of mid-September, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) reported more than 46,000 cases of COVID-19 among healthcare workers since the be-

ginning of the pandemic, with 40 deaths. There is no separate tally of physician cases or deaths. Exposure to COVID through patients or coworkers is a small percentage of healthcare worker cases; in most cases, especially before vaccines became available, the source of exposure for healthcare workers was household or social contact.



Joseph Wethington, MD, PhD

The dedicated community physician and leader

Joseph Wethington, MD, PhD, lived and breathed medicine, making it his life's work to treat patients and ensure that people had access to services in all stages of their lives. A family medicine physician, Wethington enjoyed a varied career that included serving as Anoka County medical examiner, establishing and growing medical clinics and programs, leading medical practices and staffing emergency rooms—all on top of his own clinical practice.



After retiring from clinic work in the early 1990s, Wethington stayed active in medicine by serving as medical director of a nursing home and volunteering his services at a free clinic in Minneapolis. He stayed curious about medicine well into his 90s, relishing conversations with granddaughter Anna Wethington, MD, about what she was learning in medical school and her internal medicine residency. He wanted to know more about everything from cytokines to cancer treatments.

“Somehow every discussion we had went back to medicine and what he loved about it and missed about it. He was always wanting to learn more about medicine,” says Anna Wethington, who recently started her first job at the Park Nicollet Clinic in Minneapolis. The last conversation she had with her grandfather was about COVID. He wanted to know what she thought and read about the disease and what healthcare facilities should be doing.

Wethington, 93, contracted COVID and died in April 2020. Born in 1926 in Huntington, West Virginia, and raised on a dairy farm, he earned a doctorate in anatomy from the University of Minnesota

before embarking on medical school at the University of Ottawa. Wethington taught anatomy while attending medical school. Returning to Minneapolis, Wethington completed his residency at St. Mary's Hospital, where he met two physicians, Matthew Plasha, MD, and James Sipe, MD, and joined them in their growing practice in Coon Rapids in 1961.

He was instrumental in growing the clinic into a multispecialty practice called Comprehensive Medical Care with 47 physicians and seven locations. Eventually it became part of the Allina Health system. In parallel, he served as the Anoka County medical examiner for 26 years. His daughter, Margaret Arnold, recalls being in the car with her siblings when Wethington would get summoned over the radio to the scene of an accident. It seemed normal.

So did Wethington's long hours working at the clinic and in the emergency rooms at Mercy and United hospitals, where he was a charter member. Long interested in geriatrics, Wethington helped establish the Anoka County Well Senior Clinic and the Mercy/Unity hospice program.

Wethington and his wife, Ellen, joined efforts at their church to open and support a medical clinic in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala. For his many contributions to medicine, the Minnesota Medical Association gave Wethington its 1990 Physicians Award for Community Service.

“He worked harder than anyone I know, longer than anyone I know, and put his

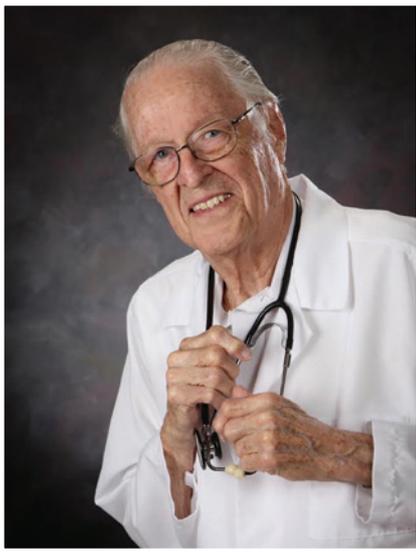
six kids through college. He had a lot of energy and was always go, go, go,” Anna Wethington says, noting that her grandfather’s constant work shaped her approach to being a doctor, including incorporating more work-life balance. “His four loves were medicine, family, gardening and travel—and he could talk about them all day long every day in whatever order.”

Wethington threw himself into many passions, including gardening and agricul-

ture, reading voraciously and writing. He was on a first-name basis with the medical librarian at Abbott Northwestern Hospital, where Wethington would pore over medical literature.

“He was passionate about bringing together not only the patient care, but also solving medical problems,” Arnold says. “He really wanted to understand the science behind what was happening and be current.”

Wethington also was the life of the party, who loved to gather with his large extended family, including 14 grandchildren. With Anna, two other grandchildren followed Wethington’s footsteps into healthcare: Claire Arnold is finishing her final year of medical school and Ellen Arnold is pursuing a degree in pharmacy, both at the University of Minnesota.



Richard Salk, MD

The classic small-town physician During a 51-year career as a family medicine physician in Albany, Minnesota, Richard Salk, MD, served as a pillar of the community who was there for people no matter what. He made it a practice to see patients seven days a week, delivering more than 3,000 babies and treating all manner of ailments, illnesses and farm and car accidents in central Minnesota.

Then, after long days seeing patients, Salk made time to serve for decades on the local school, nursing home and hospital boards. He also helped establish the Albany Medical Center, Albany Community Hospital, and Mother of Mercy Nursing Home and directed the men’s choir at church. He never complained about his lengthy days with patients, says his son Greg Salk.

When Greg Salk asked his father about his deep commitment to work, Salk replied: “I really love the science of medicine, I love helping people and I never view it as a job. In my mind, I never worked a day in my life.”

Born in Sauk Rapids in 1925, Salk died of COVID in November 2020 at age 95. He already was in declining health at that point, but likely would have found it noteworthy that it was the virus of the century that took him out, Greg Salk says.

Salk’s potential shone bright and early, when he completed medical school at the University of Minnesota and became a fully licensed physician at age 23. Salk enlisted in the U.S. Navy during World War II and completed his education at the Navy’s behest, ultimately serving in the U.S. Air Force as a physician during the Korean War. (Most of that service involved delivering babies on base in Cheyenne, Wyoming.)

Salk thoroughly enjoyed his patients and being a steady, consistent family physician through the generations. As a prototypical small-town physician, Salk would see patients at the nursing home and hospital in the morning, treat others at the clinic during the day and then finish his work by doing rounds again with patients at the hospital and nursing home. He also made regular house calls when needed.

“One of Dad’s peers told me, ‘I’ve never known anyone who worked harder than he did. And more importantly, I’ve never known a more compassionate doctor in my life,’” Greg Salk says. “He was always fighting for those who were underserved.”

As Salk aged and moved into the nursing home he helped establish, Greg Salk noticed the impeccable care his dad received. He commented to a nurse that he was very impressed with the staff’s stellar treatment for his father. She responded that Salk served for years as the family doctor for many staff members; they wanted to provide him the same compassion and care he showed them. Salk frequently completed quiet acts of charity, including paying for a patient’s specialty care and for a promising student’s medical education.

The father of 12 children, Salk and his wife, Jean, demonstrated a strong work ethic, commitment to serving others and deep compassion, his son says. Though none of their children pursued medicine, Greg Salk’s daughter, Hannah Salk-Elsenpeter, MD, recently completed her family medicine residency and started practicing at Cuyuna Regional Medical Center in Crosby. She had other opportunities, but Salk-Elsenpeter wanted to follow in her grandfather’s footsteps of serving families and the community with personal, continuous care, Greg Salk says.

Over the years, Salk made a giant impact on his community. He leaves a legacy of quiet service, expert medical care, the love of a good joke and the ability to connect with anyone and everyone. “He had an intrigue for the science of medicine. He was a compassionate man and he loved to help people,” Greg Salk says. “It was the perfect marriage of the God-given gift of a brilliant mind and a generous soul.” MM

Suzy Frisch is a Twin Cities freelance writer.