Larger Than Life
The renowned orthopaedic surgeon and researcher is also a mentor, right down to his bones.

The results of a physician's work are spelled out in absolute terms, in the body and blood of another, and indirectly, in all the ways that good health reverberates. But for a special kind of physician, the impact extends beyond individual healing; their work shapes their colleagues and mentees, their community, their field. One such physician is Michael G. Ehrlich. A specialist in pediatric orthopaedic surgery, he has been a practicing clinician for almost half a century, and at Brown for 20 years.

Ehrlich is first and foremost a caregiver. Recognized nationally for his work with disabled children and expert handling of difficult diagnostic and therapeutic problems, he is one of the nation's leading experts in clubfoot surgery and pioneers of the Ilizarov leg-lengthening procedure. Over the decades, he has helped hundreds of children walk for the first time. At Brown, Ehrlich works tirelessly to design and perform groundbreaking treatments: in 2003, he succeeded in growing bone alongside cartilage in a first-of-its-kind procedure on a 9-year-old boy born without a fibula.

Underlying Ehrlich's clinical successes is a fundamental philosophy. "He believes strongly in the importance of treating patients as people rather than body parts or technical exercises," says Christopher W. DiGiovanni, one of Ehrlich's former residents and chief of Brown's Foot and Ankle Service and director of its orthopaedic residency program. "He taught me that our job is quite simply to get our patients as close to the outcomes they—and we—dream of. But he has always been quick to remind us that we are all patients."

This awareness of the universality of vulnerability—the deep appreciation that no one, in the end, is spared the experience of feeling powerless against the larger forces of one's own body—is perhaps part of the reason Ehrlich connects so easily with his patients. Ehrlich, who in recent years has needed several orthopaedic surgeries himself, offers his patients not only the promise of advanced medical treatment, but kind words—and, often, jokes. Brent Lang '04 was one such patient. Born severely flat-footed, Lang needed several complicated surgeries to stop the progression of his arthritis and to enable him to move without difficulty.

"Growing up I was very sensitive about the way I walked," says Lang. "I was mocked and bullied." Ehrlich discussed the surgeries thoroughly with Lang's family, answered their questions, and kept them smiling. "He would always ask if I was ready for my 'brain surgery','', says Lang. Because of the surgeries, Lang—now a successful journalist in Los Angeles—walks and even runs without pain. "Dr. Ehrlich changed my life immeasurably," he says.

Although Ehrlich has a certain ease with his patients and possesses what colleagues describe as a "rare genius," his accomplishments certainly didn't come without sacrifice and toil. A fan of the maxim "suffering builds character," "he makes it difficult for others to complain, as he generally works harder than everyone else," says a former resident, David Asprino, now chairman and program director of the Department of Orthopaedics at New York Medical College. "Not that they won't," Asprino adds.

EARNING A REPUTATION
First trained in internal medicine after he graduated, in 1963, from Columbia University's College of Physicians & Surgeons, Ehrlich realized that the specialty
Patients and their families would line up outside his office, sometimes *waiting until 9 or 10 at night.*

wasn't for him. He loved the diagnostic work but was frustrated: “In those days, when you’d discover an obscure underlying disease,” he says, “you had to turn the patient over to the surgeons.”

“I wanted to have a direct role in improving people’s lives, something to show for my efforts,” says Ehrlich. “I guess I’m immature that way.” Orthopaedics, he realized, would offer him that opportunity. He was accepted to a residency in the field—a rare accomplishment for a resident from a non-surgical specialty—and later worked as a fellow at the Hospital for Joint Diseases in New York under Henry Mankin, one of the most well-respected orthopaedic surgeons in the country. While a fellow, he also did research on growth plates, and at night saw patients as a junior attending at Mt. Sinai. “I started to get in the habit of working very long days,” says Ehrlich.

When Mankin was asked to be chief of orthopaedics at Harvard’s Massachusetts General Hospital, he invited Ehrlich to be chief of the hospital’s new pediatric orthopaedic service. Though only 32, Ehrlich accepted the challenge and moved with his wife, Nancy, to New England. During his 17 years at MGH, Ehrlich developed the methodical, determined approach to orthopaedic care that still characterizes his work. He saw people from all over the world, many with conditions for which there weren’t effective treatments. He spent hours with each
The residency program's rise to prominence was anything but inevitable.

patient, working to diagnose and understand their problems and to plot out a plan. "The internal medicine diagnostic bug never left me," he says.

News of his successes spread. One mother wrote a letter to Good Housekeeping that praised the "miracle" club foot surgery that had enabled her son to return to sports. Though MGH was only a few miles from the largest children's hospital in the world—Children's Hospital Boston—Ehrlich built a renowned pediatric orthopaedic program there.

Patients and their families would line up outside his office, even eating dinner on the floor while they waited for their turn—sometimes until 9 or 10 at night. Ehrlich would stay until each and every patient was seen. Almost 40 years later, he still does. "His generosity of time knows no bounds," says Aspinio.

BUILDING A PROGRAM
Ehrlich always knew he wanted to be an academic physician, and has worked hard throughout his career to advance orthopaedics through research. He has authored more than 200 articles and chapters and was the first scientist to describe an enzyme that is highly significant in joint destruction. He has been elected to several national positions, including the presidency of the Academic Orthopaedic Society as well as the Orthopaedic Research Society, and honored with numerous awards—including the Kappa Delta Award, the highest research award given by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. He also received the Huene Award, the highest award given by the Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America. At Brown, the Michael G. Ehrlich, MD, Professorship in Orthopaedic Research was created in recognition of his work. He
still meets regularly with the research department he helped build there and remains “on the front line of translational research,” says current chief resident Christopher Got.

As much as he is a preeminent clinician and researcher, Ehrlich is a mentor and leader. The consummate academic, a devotee of bowties and the arts, he is at once professorial and enthusiastically irreverent—often telling jokes and “colorful” stories. But more than anything, to his residents Ehrlich is a father figure who considers them part of his family. Many of his residents and even colleagues in turn refer to him as a “second dad.”

“Nothing,” Ehrlich says, “makes me more excited than seeing one of my residents become an academic superstar.”

Ehrlich’s passion is “first and foremost the residency,” says Peter Cole, a former resident who is now a professor at the University of Minnesota and chief of orthopaedics at its core teaching site, Regions Hospital. Under Ehrlich’s leadership, Brown’s orthopaedic residency has become one of the most selective in the country. It accepts only six residents—handpicked by Ehrlich and DiGiovanni—from 400 to 600 annual applicants.

But the program’s rise to prominence was anything but inevitable. In 1990, Ehrlich, still ensconced at Harvard, was a candidate for chief at 30 different hospitals. When the opportunity to come to Brown was presented, he was uncer-
tain: Rhode Island Hospital had undergone recent cuts as a result of a change in Medicare payments, leaving a skeleton crew of orthopaedic attendings and residents. His first office, he was told, would be in a storage closet. Furthermore, now settled in Concord, Massachusetts, he and Nancy decided they would not pull their two sons from the town's outstanding schools.

Yet he chose Brown. The decision, which meant driving for two hours through Boston traffic every morning, wasn’t an easy one. But he had faith—in the University and in his ability to “work harder than anyone else to build the program,” he says. In his first two years, Ehrlich successfully sped through three plans that he had designed to take five years each. As the program grew, so did his pride in what was being created. One at 6 a.m. several times a week. It’s here that the residents learn those larger lessons that can’t be taught in the hospital setting. “We are likely the only program in the nation with essentially unrestricted access to our chairman on a daily basis,” says Got.

This access is both a privilege and challenge. David Asprinio recalls receiving a page from Ehrlich one night after he had returned to his condo. “I had assumed it was much too late to round. When I told him I was home and had been asleep on the couch, Ehrlich simply said he would wait until I returned.” Ehrlich, who says he “holds his residents to the same standards to which he holds himself,” lets residents know about it when they inevitably fall short of this measure.

But past and current residents also report growing, and being motivated to them, describing him as “loyal,” “caring,” “tireless,” “selfless,” “driven,” and “resilient.” “Dr. Ehrlich inspires in all of us a sense of responsibility and honor as physicians,” says DiGiovanni. “He expects us to be leaders and above reproach.”

To date, under Ehrlich’s guidance, the Department of Orthopaedics has raised $40 million in research dollars, built $4 million worth of labs, and established five endowed professorships. The clinical practice that Ehrlich and others built is now one of the larger employers in Rhode Island and includes numerous nationally renowned academics and surgeons from every specialty in the field. Turnover is exceedingly low. In the residency program, 35 percent of graduates receive appointments in academic medicine—more than in any other clinical department at the University. The department currently manages 180,000 patient visits a year, which means that every six years, attendings, residents, and fellows see the equivalent of every man, woman, and child in Rhode Island.

Ehrlich says his greatest accomplishment is “working with the people at the hospital, University, and state to build one of the finest orthopaedic programs in the country.” Through his program—through the patients who will be able to do more because he treated them, the researchers who will go on to make discoveries because he supported them, the colleagues who will do more because he inspired them, and the residents who will go on to lead because he led them—his work is multiplied. “Many times I heard Dr. Ehrlich speak—I thought facetiously—of the empire he was building,” says Peter Cole. “I now realize he was serious.”

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