August 22, 2005

Dear Alumni, Parents, and Friends:

The start of every school year is a special occasion, one that invigorates the hot, humid August in Houston. There is an excitement in the air as new, ever younger (to my eyes) faces appear in our hallways eager to launch themselves onto the marvelous path toward becoming physicians.

But, this year is even more special than usual. We are not only greeting new students, but we are welcoming them into a new Medical School Building – a building much different from the one they interviewed in last fall.

In these communications, I have proudly outlined our steady progress in recovering from the ravages of Tropical Storm Allison. On Dec. 10, we opened our ground floor and our new Learning Resource Center. And, I am now delighted to tell you that on June 15, with much fanfare and a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by more than 300 faculty, students, staff, and guests, we opened the Medical School’s basement and the decorative grand staircase leading from the ground floor to the basement. The basement is a wonderful example of beauty and functionality. It features three large classrooms, four smaller classrooms, four designated problem-based learning conference rooms that can seat 12, as well as the gross anatomy lab and student lockers. Student and employee services, such as the bookstore, copy center, vending machines, snack areas, and the Office of Communications, also are located in this activity hub.

Our students are already enjoying this new space, and there is no doubt that this beautiful environment is enhancing the educational process. I know that I enjoy teaching in a wireless classroom with the latest in presentation technology – it sure beats those last
few years in the John Freeman Building when we didn't even have fully Sheetrocked classrooms, and it was anyone's guess whether an electrical outlet was working!

One exciting new part of the basement that is yet to come is our Surgical and Clinical Skills Center. Marrying the traditional aspects of physician-patient interaction with the latest educational technology, featuring mannequins and robotics, the Surgical and Clinical Skills Center promises to be an important resource for Medical School students in all years of the curriculum, as well as for residents, fellows, faculty, other practicing physicians, and industry and hospital partners. It is the only portion of our building that is yet to be completed.

The Surgical and Clinical Skills Center (SCSC), which will be built in an 11,400 square-foot space in the Medical School basement, will be the new home of the standardized patient program, complete with 12 patient rooms, video control and monitoring rooms, and upgraded video equipment and software. For the past several years, this program has operated in leased space from the Houston Medical Center.

In addition to this clinical training program, the SCSC will feature highly complex simulated learning opportunities, where students will be able to repeatedly experience real-life scenarios using highly advanced mannequins that simulate normal breathing, blood pressure, and other key vital signs while, at the same time, responding to interventions. This space will feature two dedicated simulation operating rooms, a microsurgical skills lab with four stations, a large surgical skills wet lab with nine stations, and a virtual (PC) lab for students and residents to practice skills utilizing computers and/or task trainers. Mobile equipment and multiuse space will foster the SCSC’s functionality. The aviation industry has pioneered and proven the value of using simulation approaches in training aircraft crews and pilots in responding to normal and emergency situations in flight, and we plan to adopt some of these strategies for the training of our undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The planning for the $15 million SCSC has been in the works since Tropical Storm Allison afforded the Medical School the opportunity to imagine the development of such a center, and it is now in the design stage with plans to open the doors to students in April. Although simulation centers exist in medical schools throughout the country, the one to be built here promises to be unique in that it incorporates teaching both the technical side of medicine and the personal physician-patient relationship. Eric Reichman, Ph.D., M.D., assistant professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine and director of the emergency medicine residency program, was recently named director of this exceptional educational program.

To help us promote our educational and research activities, we are redesigning our Web site under the direction of the newly created Office of Communications. We merged the talents of our Graphic Communications Group and those of the Office of Community Affairs to create this new office, which will focus on internal communications, photography,
graphic design, and poster creation. Special pricing is provided to UT-affiliated customers, including alumni. Call 713-500-5530 for more information and be sure to check out www.med.uth.tmc.edu in the coming months to see how we have progressed.

We also have recently partnered our Continuing Medical Education (CME) program by merging with the program developed by The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. This joint venture is a precedent-setting collaboration between two leading UT academic health-care institutions and will provide Grand Rounds and “full conference” services for our faculty.

Alumni are a group who often take advantage of our CME offerings, and that is also a group we are trying to better serve through the strengthening of our newly formed Office of Development and Alumni Relations. This summer, Resa Ott joined as associate director of alumni relations from the University of Houston Clear Lake, where she led that university’s alumni effort. Resa has great ideas for promoting closer relations between the school and our alumni that will unfold in greater detail soon.

Our commencement ceremony, held at the George R. Brown Hall May 31, was, as always, an occasion for both joy and sadness – sadness at bidding adieu to 193 graduating seniors and joy at sharing their happiness in achieving their long sought-after goals of becoming M.D.s. It was a wonderful event highlighted by a stirring talk by Catherine DeAngelis, M.D., M.Ph., editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association, as our featured speaker. Among the graduating students who received awards during the ceremony was Keith Gates, who received our highest honor, the Walter G. Sterling Award for Excellence, but who could not be present because he is serving in Iraq as a special operations medic in the U.S. Navy Reserves. The Sterling Award recognizes a student who has earned the respect and affection of his colleagues and patients and exhibits scholastic superiority, outstanding interpersonal relations, and energy – Keith certainly has done all of these and is an outstanding role model. I was delighted to present the award certificate and plaque to Keith's wife, Jerri, and his four-year-old daughter, Darby. (Being a grandfather of three, I know that four years olds are not crazy about certificates so I presented her with a UT teddy bear and one for her two-year-old brother, Saxton, who was not present.)

We recently had some wonderful news for our students with the announcement of two $100,000 endowed scholarships. One is from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous, and the other is from Julie Knobil, Ph.D., a previous member of our faculty and the widow of former Dean Ernst Knobil. The creation of the Ernst Knobil Endowed Scholarship Fund will provide support to deserving medical school students – a most fitting and generous tribute to Dr. Knobil’s memory. We cannot thank Julie and our anonymous donor enough.

On June 27, we celebrated our first-ever Student Clinician's Ceremony. Sponsored by a grant from the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, the ceremony allows the incoming third-year class to reflect on their medical education and to mark the transition from the classroom to the bedside. During the ceremony, I reminded our students that they must never lose sight of the fact that while science can cure, it is the combination of the art of medicine and science that heals. We are very proud of our medical school students as they progress on their paths toward becoming physicians and wish them the best.

I am always pleased to tell you of the accomplishments of our faculty.

This year, Renhao Li, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Center for Membrane Biology and the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, had his grant application ranked highest among the 91 submitted by new investigators to the American Heart Association (AHA), Texas Affiliate, thereby winning the Lyndon
Baines Johnson Research Award sponsored by that group. His research focuses on elucidating the three-dimensional organization of the multi-subunit platelet glycoprotein Ib-IX-V complex – the lack of which leads to severe bleeding disorders. It is also involved in many cardiovascular diseases, including stroke.

**Herbert L. Fred, M.D.,** professor of internal medicine, was the recipient of the TIAA-CREF Distinguished Medical Educator. This award is given annually to honor health-care professionals for their outstanding teaching and exceptional influence in the field of medical education.

**Valentin Dragoi, Ph.D.,** assistant professor of neurobiology and anatomy, was one of four scientists nationally to receive a five-year, $452,000 award from the James S. McDonnell Foundation. The grant recognizes Dr. Dragoi and his innovative studies of how the visual cortex processes and updates information.

**William Dowhan, Ph.D.,** received news that his grant, “Structure and Function of Membrane Proteins” is now in its 32nd year of National Institutes of Health funding with the recent awarding of a prestigious National Institute of General Medical Sciences NIH MERIT Award for $4.8 million over 10 years. Dr. Dowhan, holder of the John S. Dunn, Sr., Chair in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, also is the 2005 recipient of the coveted American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Avanti Award in Lipids. He will also be recognized at the upcoming Faculty Honors Convocation as recipient of the 2005 President’s Scholar Award for Research.

Our congratulations to these distinguished investigators. As we honor them, we also thank them for bringing distinction to our school.

Leadership changes over the past six months include the naming of Giuseppe Colasurdo, M.D., as interim chair of the Department of Pediatrics. He takes over for John Sparks, M.D., who stepped down after 10 years of dedicated service as chair to lead the Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine. Philip Orlander, M.D., professor and director of the Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes, and Metabolism, has been appointed assistant dean of educational programs. He will focus on moving our curriculum forward as we prepare our students for future practice. And, Sheela Lahoti, M.D., clinical assistant professor of pediatrics, has been named assistant dean for student affairs to enhance student performance on the USMLE and also provide career counseling.

In other news, our six-story Replacement Research Facility is taking shape next to the Medical School Building, as is our newly designed Webber Plaza. Come October, we will have a beautifully landscaped plaza between the Medical School and Jesse Jones Library, which will be much easier to traverse during rainy days.

It is exciting to see the Medical School grow and take shape. Our students, faculty, and staff are the immediate benefactors of these wonderful changes, and it is my hope that this rebuilding, centered around our core missions of education and research, will help us achieve recognition as one of the top medical schools in this country.

Sincerely,

Stanley G. Schultz, M.D.
Dean

The Replacement Research Facility takes shape.