



On Becoming Emeritus

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The term “Emeritus” is derived from the Latin “emereri”, meaning “to serve out one’s term”. It is used to designate one who is retired from a position but is permitted to hold the rank of his last office as an honorary title. (However, some have maintained that “emeritus” is more appropriately translated as “without merit”!) At the University of Pennsylvania, Emeritus status is conferred upon professors and associate professors in the standing faculty at the time of their retirement. A number of rights and privileges are extended to retired faculty, and they are given the opportunity to remain active in the academic community and to take part in a number of Departmental and University functions and activities.

The extent to which Emeritus faculty continue their academic activities varies tremendously. Some continue to fulfill virtually all of their previous obligations and responsibilities, while others take an entirely new direction and may retire to chop trees in the Maine woods or pursue their interest in painting and sculpting on the Chesapeake! For those who retain their ties to the University, retirement allows them to pursue activities of interest with a degree of leisure and without the pressures and obligations that existed previously. They can remain involved in areas that are intellectually stimulating, continue interaction with their colleagues, and provide the Department, the University, and various medical organizations with their time, effort and expertise at no cost. This can be a very gratifying and productive experience. Emeritus faculty have been able to relieve the active faculty of some of the mounting pressures they are facing by their role in teaching, administration, committee work, interviewing and mentoring. This is especially important today with the ever increasing rules, regulations and demands of medical practice.

Most physicians find total retirement quite difficult after spending a lifetime in an interesting, challenging and rewarding occupation. A few have been able to develop significant hobbies and outside interests to occupy themselves fully. One of my colleagues, an avid and excellent golfer, looked forward to his retirement so that he could golf six or seven days a week. He purchased a condominium in Florida adjacent to a well known golf club, and began to fulfill his dream. However, after three months he found this routine boring and he returned to a part time medical practice. At the other extreme, there are a number of emeritus faculty who continue to function essentially in a full time capacity. One such faculty member continues to see patients, serves as an attending on ward rounds and in the clinics, remains active on a number of committees, and provides teaching and clinical care at one of the University affiliates overseas.

Emeritus status can provide an individual with the best of both worlds. He or she can continue to participate in academic activities at their discretion, while at the same time allowing more time for non-professional and leisure activities. A good friend of mine gradually retired from clinical practice but has continued to attend conferences, publish and present papers at major national and international meetings, and serve as associate editor of a major journal. However, he now has time to travel extensively and to pursue a number of interests including the assembling of two complete wood working shops and building an elegant wooden sailboat, which, incidentally, did float upon being launched!

The activities of the Emeritus faculty here at the School of Medicine were summarized recently in a survey conducted by the Association of Senior and Emeritus Faculty (ASEF). It was found that 36% stated that they were still working either full time or part time at Penn in teaching, research, clinical activities and administration. 71% attended conferences, 49% served on various committees, and 34% were involved in mentoring. Of those still active at Penn, 69% retained their offices, 36% were given administrative support, and 10% had active research grants.

From a personal point of view, I have been delighted with my Emeritus role. Although I do miss my practice, the operating room, and hands on teaching of residents, there are many gratifications. I now have more time for teaching medical students, mentoring, reviewing grant applications for the OREF and manuscripts submitted for publication to The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery and other journals. I have been able to continue writing and editing, remain involved with ASEF and a number of other organizations, and take part in various activities of the Department and School of Medicine. Although no longer in active practice, I find that I am still in contact with a number of my former patients and friends and provide a certain amount of informal advice and referrals. My wife and I have been able to travel more extensively, and regularly attend the meetings of various medical organizations of particular interest to me. We also have more time to spend at our vacation home, to visit with children and grandchildren, and to bond with our last remaining pet, Harvey, our 42-year-old Musk Turtle. Thus, emeritus status has enabled me to establish an enjoyable and rewarding balance between professional and personal activities and to take part in a number of outside interests and activities.

Although I have been spending a good deal more time with my wife since becoming Emeritus, she hasn’t left me yet and we still seem to get along quite well! Perhaps my time at the University has contributed in part to this, since the old adage of “for better or for worse, but not for lunch” contains more than a modicum of truth!