

# In Good Company

## Quietly leading the world: Debra Sudan and the invisible art of organ transplants



Alumna Debra Sudan is slated to become chief of Abdominal Organ Transplant at Duke University this fall.

**Sometimes the surest sign of success is having your work go completely unnoticed.**

When Debra Sudan, M.D., FACS ('89), began a fellowship in transplant surgery at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) in Omaha, she spent the first week or so working with hospitalized, severely ill patients. Following this sobering introduction, she attended a reunion picnic for transplant recipients.

“As I was walking around and I would meet families,” Sudan said, “I couldn’t tell which (person) had had the transplant. All of them looked healthy. It was fabulous.”

Seeing the difference an organ transplant can make, enabling gravely ill patients to return to full health, convinced Sudan she’d chosen the right specialty.

“I was sold that this was the field for me,” she said. “I absolutely knew that this was the right thing.”

### **A big name in small bowel surgery**

Sudan first became interested in transplant surgery as a resident (also at Wright State), when she completed a six-month transplant research fellowship at New York University. With her career path confirmed through the two-year fellowship at UNMC, Sudan accepted a faculty position at the medical center,

where she has served for the past 12 years and attained the rank of full professor in 2004.

As a surgeon, Sudan's primary focus is small bowel transplants.

"We actually were the busiest program in the United States in 2007," she said, and the procedure is "a big part of my identity nationally. When I go to meetings, people know me for the small bowel transplant work that I've done, research I've done, the things that I've published."

### Research reveals the extent of success

Ironically, Sudan has also gained recognition for helping patients avoid the procedures in which she specializes. As director of the medical center's Intestinal Rehabilitation Program (IRP) she oversees a dedicated team focused on helping transplant candidates through other forms of treatment.

In 2007, Sudan presented a paper on the IRP and its experience treating short bowel syndrome at a meeting of the American Surgical Association, earning additional attention and prestige for the program. In reviewing the medical literature to prepare for her presentation, Sudan also made some surprising discoveries.

"Our program has done more than any single institution anywhere in world," she said. In fact, the program accounts for nearly half of all bowel-lengthening surgeries worldwide.

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"It was really quite an eye-opener. I guess in some sense, when you're working in the midst of it, you don't recognize that you're doing something unique."

Sudan fully appreciates the impact she and her colleagues are having on patients' lives, though.

When Sudan began her fellowship in 1994, fewer than 50 percent of patients undergoing bowel-lengthening surgery survived more than a year. The odds weren't appealing, but for patients facing certain death without treatment — and often too sick to wait for or tolerate transplant surgery — the risk was justified.

"Now," Sudan said, "it's about 85 to 90 percent one-year patient survival, so it's very close to isolated liver transplant."

"It is wonderful to see patients that are out living a normal life," she said. "It's certainly very, very satisfying."

### Opportunities leading back east

In addition to her clinical and research accomplishments, Sudan recently completed a two-year term as president of the Nebraska Chapter of the American College of Surgeons. The positive leadership experience contributed to her decision to leave the program she helped to build and the colleagues she respects to accept a position as chief of Abdominal Organ Transplant at Duke University beginning this fall.

Her husband, also a surgeon, will become vice-chair of surgical education at Duke. With their two children, 11-year-old Reena and 9-year-old Neil, also excited about the upcoming move, Sudan expects the transition to be positive for the whole family.

Looking back, Sudan has no regrets about her career path, including her years in Dayton.

"I think that Wright State gave us a tremendous foundation," she said. "I got excellent training in medical school, very strong basic sciences, excellent clinical skills... The enthusiasm for teaching that the Wright State faculty had was just overwhelming.

"I certainly would like to have that kind of impact on residents and fellows that I train."