

BY MARY BINDER PHOTO BY KRIS ORLOWSKI

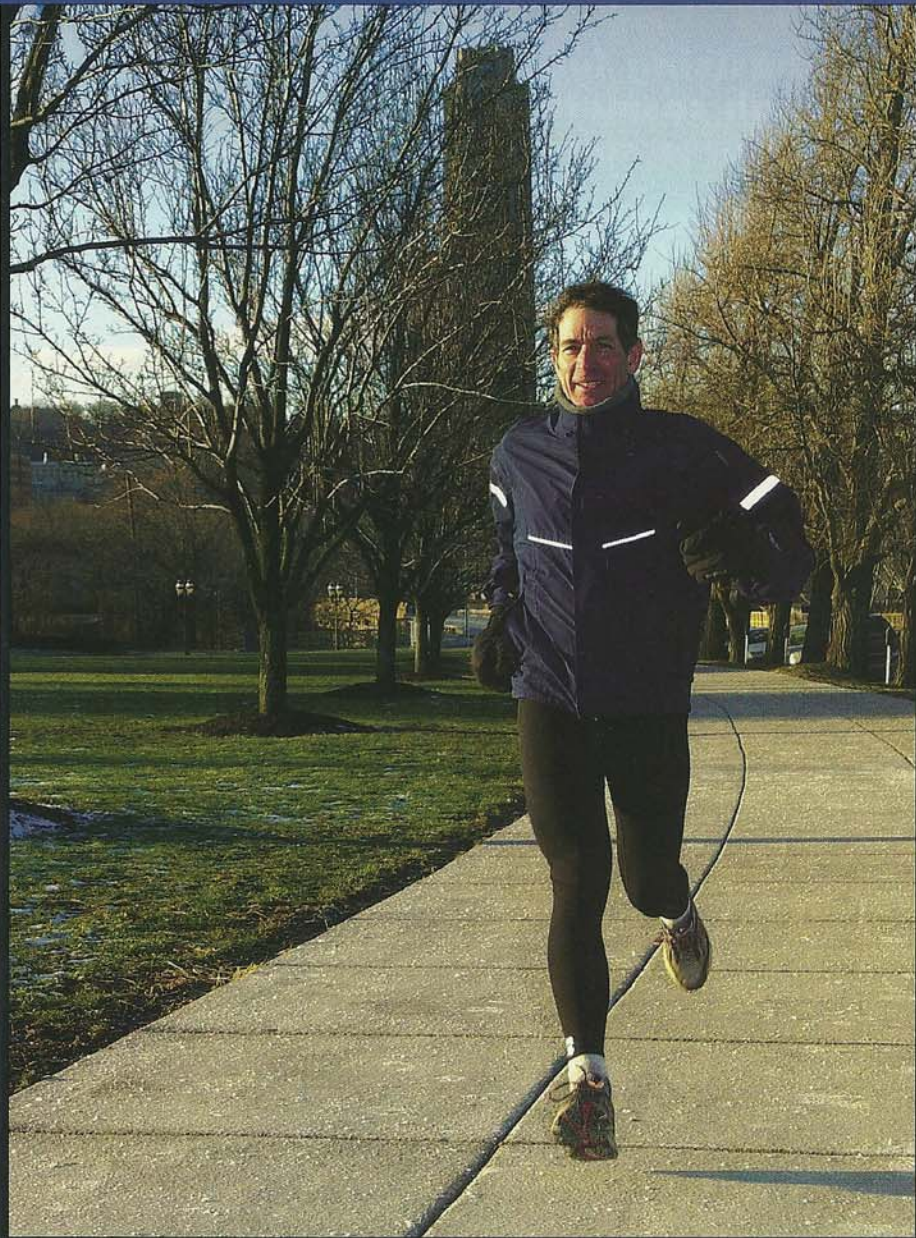
DR. Geoffrey Kurland is always on the run. A pediatric pulmonologist, his days are spent treating children with cystic fibrosis, lung transplants, severe asthma and other respiratory problems at Children's Hospital. He teaches pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh. He is also a dedicated — some would say obsessed — runner who competes in 50- and 100-mile extreme races. So one might ask how he could possibly find the time to establish yet another identity as nationally acclaimed author of *My Own Medicine: A Doctor's Life as a Patient*.

Kurland is happy to explain: "Temporary insanity."

It started when he moved to Pittsburgh in 1989 and joined a writing group headed by Pitt professor Lee Gutkind, editor of the national journal *Creative Non-Fiction*. "It was quite a varied group of doctors and nurses," Kurland says. Gutkind encouraged the medical personnel to reflect upon their life experiences. Kurland, as it turned out, had something big to write about: his own then-recent battle with hairy cell leukemia.

Despite his years of medical training, Kurland had never had regular checkups himself; his cancer might have gone undetected if he had not had an X-ray for what he thought was a broken rib in 1987. "Don't you know? Physicians are notoriously bad patients," he says. "They don't like giving up control."

Once he'd been diagnosed, however,



DOC OF ALL TRADES

Dr. Geoffrey Kurland brings an author's perceptive eye and a runner's indomitable spirit to his medicine.

Kurland made a conscious decision to trust his doctors and not second-guess them. Kurland went to the Mayo Clinic, where his father was a well-known epidemiologist. "There was no special treatment or favor," he says. "I sat in the same waiting rooms and waited like everyone else."

Hairy cell leukemia is rare, affecting only two percent of the adult population, but the survival rate was only about 40 percent in the late 1980s. Kurland was fortunate to have been diagnosed at that time; newer treatments, particularly with the drug Pentostatin, were saving lives. He eventually underwent 14 months of chemotherapy and the disease went into remission.

"Physicians are notoriously bad patients," admits Kurland. "They don't like giving up control."

Despite the physical ordeal he'd been through, Kurland was determined to run again; it was a goal that he had through all the fears, tests and even surgery. So it was that, soon after having his spleen removed, he could be seen back in exercise gear, gingerly making his way down the road from his parents' house.

It was quite a story.

The memoir succeeds in both telling a very personal tale and in explaining the

disease's treatment without getting too bogged down in medical jargon. "I didn't want this [book] to be *The Dr. Kurland Guide to Cancer*," Kurland says. "It does show a way to go into yourself to find a way to keep going. I had running."

The initial writing took place in a single burst, as an essay-length piece for his writing group. "I was falling asleep one night, and I could feel or see myself getting chemotherapy," he says. "I

got up and just wrote the whole thing." Gutkind helped to pare Kurland's essay down to 1,000 words, and it appeared in *Newsweek's* "My Turn" column on April 15, 1991.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. "I got a lot of mail," he recalls, "and I answered each and every one by hand. Then I got a phone call from a literary agent whose father had gone through chemotherapy, and he wondered if I would be interested in writing a book."

The project took 10 years and numerous rewrites to complete. "I didn't have an editor in the beginning," Kurland says. "There were a lot of rejections until Times Books accepted it based on the eight chapters I had finished."

His work was far from done even then. The publisher set the book's length at 100,000 words; the submitted chapters totaled around 90,000. "I had a really good editor," Kurland says. "She X'ed out entire pages where I was caught up in detail."

My Own Medicine: A Doctor's Life as a Patient was published in August 2002 to a warm critical reception. *The New Yorker* wrote: "The way in which serious illness alters one's sense of self and of life is compellingly expressed in this energetic, nervy narrative, as Kurland's illness and eventual recovery collide with a host of shifts." "I'm glad they liked it," Kurland says. "I tried to make it readable."

Kurland has no immediate plans to write another book. His schedule is demanding enough, and he likes to have time for his wife, Kristen, who is a senior lecturer at Carnegie Mellon's H. John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management and School of Architecture.

"Any experience like this can't help but change you," Kurland says. "There are some things that I can do better now. I'm more acutely aware when patients wait. And I listen to them even more closely." ☺

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