

Crowe Society Alumni Spotlight



Robert Ruben, MD

Residency Graduation: 1964

University Professor and Chairman Emeritus of the Department of Otorhinolaryngology and Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the Montefiore Medical Center
New York, New York

"Tell us about your career from graduation to the present."

I have carried out basic research in communication disorders, with special focus on the inner ear. My initial work used genetic models to understand the physiology and pathological anatomy of inner ear hearing loss. My work at NIH focused on the developmental cell biology of the inner ear, both normal and pathological.

As I came to realize that otorhinological problems in children require a special focus, I, along with others, founded a new specialty: Pediatric Otolaryngology. I had the honor to serve as the founding president of the Society for Ear, Nose, and Throat Advances in Children, founder of the American Society of Pediatric Otolaryngology, and of the Section of Otorhinolaryngology and Bronchoesophagology of the American Academy of Pediatrics. In 1978, I founded The International Journal of Pediatric Otolaryngology, the first medical journal to require peer review and the first dedicated to ear, nose, and throat problems in children.

Since my first year in medical school, I have been fascinated by the history of medicine. I have authored several monographs and books concerning the history of otorhinolaryngology and have, most recently, written about personalized medicine and the inadequacies of some randomized controlled trials. I have also served as the Chairperson of the Section of History of Medicine and Public Health at the New York Academy of Medicine from 2009 – 2024.

**What are you most proud of in your professional life/career?*

Spearheading the new concept that language—not just hearing in the medical sense but language in the functional sense—is a key outcome measure of otolaryngologic interventions. In 1987, I organized a conference in Denmark to address the need for research opportunities in communications disorders, and this became the scientific basis of a new institute at NIH, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communications Disorders (NIDCD).

The conference was an early moment in the struggle that involved research and advocacy and ultimately found fruition when “Other Communication Disorders” was included as part of the essential purpose of NIDCD.

**Favorite hobbies or activities away from medicine*

I’m a bibliophile who loves collecting and organizing books. Over the years, Hopkins will receive about 2,000 of my medical and scientific volumes. I have donated my collection of artists’ books to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and gifted my collection of instruments used to study acoustics before the advent of the vacuum tube and numerous 19th century otolaryngological instruments to Johns Hopkins University.

To date, I have completed three of five volumes in my series Ontogenies of Otolology. My final volumes are expected in 2026 and 2027. They are all through Wayenborgh Publishing, an imprint of Kugler Publications, Amstersdam.

**What is your favorite memory from your residency days?*

One favorite is the annual turtle derby. We would bring turtles from the Eastern Shore, write names—like “John-Out-Of-The-Shower-by-11” —on their shells, and place our bets on which would win the race. The proceeds went toward building a swimming pool for the housing compound next to the hospital, where interns, residents, and their families lived. It was a tradition that brought everyone together and added a bit of fun to our demanding training years.

** What is your most poignant memory from your residency days?*

One of the most poignant memories from my residency was the day President Kennedy was assassinated. I had just finished placing a Souttar tube—a flexible metal tube once used for palliation in esophageal cancer—when the news broke. The following day, I traveled to Washington, D.C., and stood along the route of the funeral procession, watching in silence as world leaders such as Charles de Gaulle, the president of France, and Haile Selassie I, the emperor of Ethiopia, walked past. It was a moment of profound sorrow and historical gravity that I will never forget.

** What advice would you give residents now?*

Achieve empathy with each patient's needs and expectations so as to care for the person, not just the one area of sickness of your specialty.

**How has our specialty changed over the years and where do you see in going in the future ?*

Since I completed my residency at Hopkins our field has dramatically evolved. We can now perform sophisticated middle-ear reconstructions and cochlear implants. Researchers are developing technology that enables patients affected by stroke, spinal cord injuries and ALS to speak again by using implanted electrodes to capture neural signals, which machine-learning algorithms then translate into text or generate synthesized speech. The ongoing research into communication disorders continues to be important and exciting. My work has been guided by the fact that communication is essential for society to progress, and we, as otolaryngologists, are the stewards of hearing and speech: the foundations of human communication.