

# Success the Norm for Genetic Counseling Program

The USC School of Medicine Master of Science in Genetic Counseling Program, administered through the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, is a success by any measure. Begun in 1985 as a result of the vision of the founding director, Dr. S. Robert Young, the program is fast approaching its 100th graduate, just one among many milestones it will achieve during 2002.

Genetic counselors are specialized health professionals who counsel individuals and families about genetic disease and birth defects. Acting as a liaison to the health care team, they assess patients' psychosocial status and provide support to assist in adjustment to the physical and emotional burdens of genetic diagnosis.

The USC Genetic Counseling Program is one of 25 programs in the country and was the first of its kind in the Southeast. In 1991 and 1998, it received rare "Commendation for Excellence" awards from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education.

Six to eight students are accepted each year from approximately 80-100 applicants making Genetic Counseling one of the most competitive graduate programs at USC. Since 1985, 99 genetic counselors have graduated, and more than half of the practicing graduates serve in the Southeast.

"We were one of the leaders in establishing a curriculum of this kind," said Program Director Janice Edwards. "We have one of the older programs comparatively speaking," she said.

With maturity comes respect and emulation. "We've been visited by faculty from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and health officials from The Netherlands who wanted to examine what we have in place in preparation for starting similar programs."



*Genetic counselor Jill Fischer delivering the Distinguished Alumni Lecture*

Edwards' participation in the American Board of Genetic Counseling International Education Committee has led to even more global success—the first international exchange of genetic counseling students. "A USC student will complete a summer rotation at the University of Melbourne, Australia. In return, in November we will host a University of Melbourne student who is an *in vitro* fertilization counselor," Edwards said.

Assisted reproduction is a subspecialty that attracts genetic counselors. Jill Fischer graduated from USC's program in 1993 and works for one of the preeminent fertility centers in the nation—The Institute for Reproductive Medicine and Science of

St. Barnabas in Livingston, N.J. On February 22, 2002, Fischer returned to her alma mater as the Genetic Counseling Program's first Distinguished Alumni Lecturer.

"I got the idea for the lecture series after attending a national meeting where I saw several of our graduates in all venues of the field," Edwards said. "Two of our alumni were in charge of meetings that involved more than 1,000 people and one of our 2001 graduates won a nationwide award for best research. I saw Jill at the meeting and thought she would make an excellent speaker."

Fischer was both gratified and excited. "Such an honor only furthered my understanding of the support that this department has for me and my work and for our profession."

She also offered high praise for her USC training. "It definitely helped me get where I am today. Being a genetic counselor in my subspecialty—assisted reproductive technologies and preimplantation genetic diagnosis—is rare today and practically unheard of when I was in school. The department supported my desire to be in this area of work," she said.

"I believe I am a good counselor because of the education I received at USC. I can still remember asking what to do if I became emotional during a session with a patient. Janice Edwards said that showing emotion would make us appear more human. Many times when my eyes fill with tears over the circumstances in which my patients find themselves, I silently thank Janice because my patients see that I care."

Fischer believes a continuing lecture series is a good idea. Because of the quality of the program Young and Edwards developed, however, the difficulty may come in choosing which alumnus to honor.

— Sam Morton