Years of Personalized, Genomic Medicine in Lancaster County

Co-founders Holmes & Caroline Morton celebrate a milestone & look to train the future clinician-scientists of tomorrow

In 1989, Holmes and Caroline Morton shared a vision to serve the vulnerable Amish and Mennonite children of Lancaster County suffering from rare diseases.

Focused on the core belief that the most advanced medical technologies could be integrated into primary care, the Mortons rallied the local communities, personal friends, and a few key institutional partners to create the Clinic for Special Children (CSC).

Today, the CSC serves over 2,500 patients from 34 states and 17 countries, representing 150 unique genetic disorders. The clinic saves millions of dollars in unspent medical costs year over year by providing efficient diagnostics, drastically reducing hospitalizations, and by preventing major disabilities. More importantly, the CSC is now a model for care that is being replicated throughout the world—a Lancaster County medical innovation.

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“We have learned how to close the implementation gap,” says Kevin Strauss. “Our unique combination of clinical care and research has made all the difference in the lives of the children and families we serve.”

Now celebrating 25 years, the CSC is not resting on past accomplishments or accolades. Instead, the clinic has begun a
rigorous training program for the clinician-scientists of tomorrow. “One of the best investments we can make for the future is to train young, talented students so that we always have exceptional physicians and scientists ready to serve the most vulnerable children of Lancaster County,” says Strauss.

A Catalyst Gift for Clinical Research & Education

Dr. Morton’s greatest mentor from his training at Boston Children’s Hospital was Mary Ellen Avery, a pioneering clinician-scientist who discovered surfactant in 1959. When Dr. Avery passed away in 2011, Dr. Morton was invited to speak at her memorial service. Dr. Morton spoke of Avery’s tenacity and intellect; how he would long remember her tough questions and focus on public health late in life. As only Dr. Morton could do, he also shared a surprise announcement with the crowd of close friends and colleagues.

“For this reason the Clinic for Special Children has established a Mary Ellen Avery Fellowship. Our Avery Fellows will learn about disparities in rural health care, the education and work of midwives, the culture of the Plain Communities, and they will learn how the Clinic for Special Children could bring genomic medicine to the everyday work of doctors outside university hospitals.”

Lancaster General Health has supported the Morton’s efforts since their arrival in Lancaster, and on the 25th anniversary, LG Health has stepped forward with a leadership gift to support clinical research and education. The clinic seeks to raise $1 million over the next two years to fully fund the Avery Fellowship program in perpetuity, and LG Health’s gift of $150,000 will be a catalyst for giving from other organizations and individuals. With the community’s support, CSC will serve a new generation of clinician-scientists that will propel the Morton’s vision forward.

The Mortons came to Lancaster County in 1989 with hope for children suffering from rare diseases. That hope is now firmly rooted in strong medical outcomes and treatments they never could have imagined possible. The Clinic for Special Children’s growth has paralleled the development of the human genome project, yet CSC is an unparalleled example of implementation and efficacy of personalized genomic medicine. Lancaster can claim a unique medical innovation, and communities throughout the world will benefit from the clinic’s ingenuity.