

Photo courtesy of Glenn Rennels



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IN PURSUIT OF DUAL PASSIONS

BY KIMBERLY SWICK SLOVER

GLENN RENNELS’S COLLEAGUES THOUGHT IT WAS “A LUNATIC MOVE” when, in 1990, he gave up an endowed chair at MIT to work in computer technology at The Permanente Medical Group (TPMG). But for Rennels (Med’80), this was the ideal way to unite his dual passions for medicine and artificial intelligence.

After medical school, Rennels went on to earn a PhD in medical information science and complete a residency in anesthesiology at Stanford University, followed by his appointment to MIT’s Cabot Chair for Artificial Intelligence in Medicine. But he was drawn to TPMG by the opportunity to practice anesthesiology, while also helping to transform the organization into one of the nation’s most technologically sophisticated medical groups.

Rennels and his colleagues designed a popular application that acts as the equivalent of match.com for patients in search of primary care doctors. Later, as TPMG’s chief technology officer, he led the development of eConsult, a complex and novel computer system in which he takes obvious pride.

“When a primary care physician refers a patient to a specialist, eConsult facilitates specialty care before the patient leaves the PCP’s office,” Rennels

explains. “Immediately, eConsult asks the primary care doctor problem-specific questions designed by the specialist. Then eConsult specifies x-rays and labs to be completed prior to the specialist appointment, books the appointment, gives instructions for interim care, and prints patient-education handouts pertaining to the problem.”

All 5,000 doctors in Rennels’s group embraced eConsult because it enables the PCP and specialist to become a close-knit team, accomplishing more together than when they were working separately.

After 23 years at TPMG, Rennels recently stepped down to work independently, with plans to pursue the next innovations in medical technology. He believes his location in Silicon Valley could be a fertile environment for growing his own startup on the next frontier of health care.

“The conveniences provided to patients when they can connect with doctors via video links such as FaceTime are tremendous, especially as the population ages,” Rennels says. “For a 75-year-old patient, it’s onerous to troop into a doctor’s office. It’s exciting to think that through the use of video conferencing and wearable sensor technologies, some of those interactions could be done from a patient’s home, making the physical distance to the doctor’s office less of an obstacle to care.”

For Rennels, software design and medicine are “creative and wonderful processes.”

“I love them both and have devoted my career to finding touchpoints between the two,” he says.