



Steven Gregory Photography

Dr. Lucy Tompkins is chief epidemiologist at Stanford Hospital and Clinics.

“Lucy is a natural mentor.”

tify strains of bacteria in one day rather than weeks—a discovery that would prove life-saving to countless patients.

Tompkins and Falkow married in 1983, and the lab partners relocated to Palo Alto, California, where they would become faculty members at her alma mater, Stanford University. She became one of only a few women on Stanford’s medical faculty at the time, and, at 43, the oldest assistant professor, she notes. Just five years later she was named the chief epidemiologist for Stanford Hospital and Clinics, a position she still holds.

The sleuthing involved in epidemiology and infectious disease is what keeps her engaged through all these years: “You have to put all the puzzle pieces together,” she says. “You need to understand the symptoms of the patients, each patient’s immune response, the microbiology of the organism, and how it spreads.”

Tompkins stopped seeing patients in 2009 but continues to teach microbiology and still researches molecular epidemiology as well as hospital-acquired infections, such as *Clostridium difficile*.

Tompkins also mentors infectious disease postdoctoral fellows, and encourages many young physicians.

“Lucy is a natural mentor,” says Marisa Holubar, MD, Tompkins’s associate medical director. “She constantly has people in her office, listening to them and providing advice. She takes trainees’ goals and aspirations very seriously.”

These days, women entering the medical profession are no longer a minority: Geisel’s class of 2020 is 58 percent women. In that regard, Tompkins said, “I’ve watched tremendous positive change in the medical environment.” And she’s proud to have played a role in making it easier for today’s young women—and young mothers—to achieve their dreams.

SOLVING PUZZLES, REALIZING A DREAM

BY MANDY ERICKSON

LUCY TOMPKINS (MED’73) WAS ANYTHING BUT YOUR TYPICAL MEDICAL student in the 1970s. She was such an anomaly, “They sent a photographer from The Valley News,” she remembers. “Whoever heard of a 30-year-old woman with an 8-year-old kid starting med school?” It took Tompkins many years to realize her dream of becoming a doctor, but in the end, she more than succeeded.

Today, Tompkins holds the Lucy Becker Professorship in Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine, her undergraduate alma mater, and is chief epidemiologist and head of infection control at Stanford Hospital and Clinics.

Tompkins had always wanted to be a doctor. “My family worshipped physicians, including my mother’s physician who successfully treated her for influenza in 1918 and my pediatricians in St. Louis and in Denver,” she explains. As a child, she was treated for numerous infections—infections that are now preventable with vaccines.

But as an undergraduate majoring in biology in 1958, “there was no encouragement for women to go to med school,” she recalls. “In one class, if the women said they wanted to go into medicine, the professor would say, ‘Have you thought about teaching or nursing?’”

Tompkins married at the end of her junior year and finished her degree at the University of Denver, where

her husband was starting medical school. When the couple relocated to Washington, DC, Tompkins pursued her scientific interests, earning a PhD in microbiology in the lab of Dr. Stanley Falkow at Georgetown University. Then, when her husband was recruited to the faculty of Dartmouth Medical School, she saw an opportunity. The school had just relaunched its medical degree program, and Falkow encouraged her to apply. Dartmouth accepted her, and her medical career was launched.

After earning her MD at Dartmouth, Tompkins stayed in Hanover for her internship and first year of residency. She completed her training at the University of Washington, followed by two post-doctoral fellowships in infectious diseases and clinical microbiology.

Tompkins and her husband eventually divorced. By the late ’70s, Falkow had also moved to Seattle, and Tompkins began collaborating with him again. In 1979, they published a study about a method they discovered that would iden-