

William Birch, M.D., obstetrician and gynecologist, is credited with founding the Physician Assistant program at WMU in 1972, one of the first PA programs in the nation and the second in Michigan. Through his continual presence at the state Capitol and persistent determination, Dr. Birch convinced the legislature that educating physician assistants would be beneficial—and that locating the program in Kalamazoo at WMU would assure its success.

And, Dr. Birch was a vital part of that ongoing success. He served as the program's first clinical director and initiated a campaign of support when budget cuts threatened its future later on. In a Letter to the Editor in the Kalamazoo Gazette, dated January 28, 1982, Birch wrote:

“I have never before asked for public support, but I would appreciate it if all who have known me and the additional work load I carried to develop this program, would write to the Western Michigan University Board of Trustees expressing deep concern. This effort might turn the tide and help save this most valuable asset from extinction.”

His efforts succeeded, and the program continues and thrives, carrying on his distinguished legacy.

Dr. Birch was in practice for 40 years, 29 of them in Kalamazoo at Bronson Methodist Hospital, before his retirement in 1974. Throughout his life, he was a leader in his profession and the community. He served as president of the Kalamazoo Academy of Medicine, obstetrics chief at Bronson, president of the Kalamazoo Rotary Club, and a recipient of its prestigious Red Rose Citation for community service.

The Michigan State Medical Society awarded Dr. Birch its Certificate of Commendation in recognition of his pioneering efforts with the WMU PA program, and in 1976, WMU presented him with an honorary doctorate. In 2003, he became an honorary member of the WMU College of Health and Human Services' Outstanding Alumni Academy.

In addition, Dr. Birch was a best-selling author whose book, “A Doctor Discusses Pregnancy,” sold more than 10 million copies and was a principle source of information for mothers-to-be throughout the world. He was also a medical pioneer, who co-developed a sterilization technique that became the standard for the nation.

Most importantly and fundamentally, however, Birch was a devoted family man and a dedicated, caring doctor. Amidst his many accomplishments and endeavors, he delivered more than 11,000 babies and once told a reporter, “I never had patients; I just had friends.”

This good doctor passed away in August 1996, “And indeed,” concluded a memorial to him in the Kalamazoo Gazette, “he should be remembered as a friend of mankind.”