TERRY WAHLS, MD
by Jane Kennedy

Dr. Terry Wahls joined the Marshfield Clinic in 1987, when there were only a handful of female physicians on staff. She helped launch a monthly dinner meeting that fostered collegiality among the growing cadre of female physicians and actively mentored female residents, staff, and physician leaders. She was instrumental in working toward equal pay for equal work at Marshfield Clinic.

Dr. Wahls grew up on a farm in Iowa. She loved outdoor activities such as skiing, hiking and biking. Her background and interests and the presence of a world-class medical center attracted her to the Marshfield community.

Terry was a remarkable physician, an internist, and was truly in demand by the women of Marshfield, many of whom had never had the opportunity to be cared for by a female physician. Her schedule was always full.

Dr. Wahls was known for achieving justice. As a lesbian, she was a frontrunner in our community in advocating for the LGBTQ community in ways big and small. She said, "I grew comfortable with living my life as an out lesbian in Marshfield. And the town grew comfortable with me." She eventually decided to have a child, but her parents worried that the community would disapprove of her decision to undergo IVF (she was unable to find a fertility clinic in Minnesota, Wisconsin or Iowa that would treat a single woman and received care in San Francisco) and raise a child as a single parent. Happily, her experience was generally positive from patients, colleagues and friends in Marshfield.

However, she tells the story of birth announcements: "After I gave birth, I searched the newspaper for the birth announcement, but it wasn't there. I called the newspaper, who said they were never notified. I called Labor and Delivery, who said they didn't bother notifying the paper because I wasn't married, and the newspaper never published birth announcements for single mothers. That was July 1991. I called the paper again, asking for the editor-in-chief. His response was terse. "We don't publish announcements unless the mother is married." Later that day, the editor called back, apologized, and agreed to publish her son, Zack's birth announcement, and, furthermore, changed their policy on publishing not only birth announcements but also including married women's first names, rather than referring to them under their husband's names. The newspaper published an editorial about the change in policy. Terry received many thank you letters from local residents. Back in her department in Internal Medicine, she was amused to learn that there was a betting pool to wager whether she would win her case.



Terry Wahls

A few years later, Dr. Wahls recognized through her personal experience that there was a great need for quality day care for children in this community. Through a lot of hard work and persistence, she was able to achieve what others had been trying to do for twenty years- the establishment of a daycare center for clinic employees' children.

Dr. Wahls moved to the University of Iowa in 2000 and has since become an internationally recognized scientist investigating the role of diet and lifestyle to treat multiple sclerosis–related symptoms. She is the author of books which detail her recovery from severe disability due to progressive multiple sclerosis using a diet and lifestyle program that she created. Incredibly, she was able to move from using a tilt wheelchair to riding her bicycle to work each day.

Through her intelligence and persistence, Terry Wahls made a place for herself in the Marshfield community for many years, and through her advocacy, made the community a more welcoming and better place for all of us.