

I first met Mike Watson almost 30 years ago when a group of us were discussing setting up a new medical specialty organization—the American College of Medical Genetics. He was a dynamo then and that has not changed since. We were a very small group with very few resources and, without Mike, we would have stayed that way, or worse. Almost single-handedly in those days, Mike made the connections, wrote the grants, hired the staff and allowed the College to become what it is today, a leading medical specialty organization that is ushering medical genetics into the future. He is one of the brightest and most tireless individuals I know, and there is no way we can thank him enough for his dedication and work over these last three decades. Mike made the College what it is today.

—Lynn D. Fleisher, PhD, JD, general counsel, ACMG

It is fair to say that the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics would not be here today without the dedication and hard work of Mike Watson. We are indebted to him for his many contributions.

—Louanne Hudgins, MD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

ACMG Expresses Appreciation to Dr. Michael S. Watson: ACMG's Executive Director Will Depart ACMG at the End of 2019

When Michael S. Watson, MS, PhD, FACMG became the first executive director of the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ACMG) in 2000, it would have been impossible to imagine the field of medical genetics today and the pivotal role ACMG would play in the evolution of the field. Now, as Mike prepares to depart ACMG later this year, the College conveys its enduring gratitude for his immense contributions to the ACMG, the ACMG Foundation for Genetic and Genomic Medicine and the grants he has managed while with ACMG. Mike has devoted himself to advancing the missions of the College and Foundation and it is no hyperbole to say that his hard work and commitment to the growth of ACMG have made the organization what it is today and that he leaves the College



in a strong position to face the exciting challenges and growth of the field ahead.

ACMG President Anthony R. Gregg, MD, MBA, FACOG, FACMG said, "In this age of genomic medicine, it may be hard for some to remember when newborn screening was fragmented at a national level. Some states had no screening program or screened a minimum number of conditions. The same period in time was marked by prenatal screening that was at best targeted to one or

The members of the committee that hired Mike Watson have been extremely pleased with our choice. The ACMG was financially challenged at the time and we needed Mike to obtain grants as a significant source of new income. Mike has been incredibly successful and the ACMG has grown tremendously under his leadership.

—Edward R. McCabe, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG



Mike's contribution to ClinGen goes to the very beginning of the idea of a consortium that would be needed to tackle the goal of creating a comprehensive and expertly curated compendium of clinically relevant genes and variants. He had the vision for how ACMG's active participation in the consortium could benefit both groups—that ClinGen would advance the science of genomic medicine to benefit ACMG committees and task forces, while ACMG could provide a platform for ClinGen to grow through active participation of the ACMG membership. This relationship has turned out to be extraordinarily successful and has generated a tremendous amount of progress toward evidence-based genomic medicine.

—Jonathan S. Berg, MD, PhD, FACMG, professor, Department of Genetics, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, co-principal investigator of the UNC/ACMG/Geisinger/Kaiser ClinGen U41 grant



Mike Watson was the heart and soul of ACMG for the 19 years during which he was the executive director. The growth and resounding success of the College throughout this critical period was due in no small part to Mike's many talents and commitment. Whatever great things that ACMG is bound to accomplish in the coming years will owe much to the foundation that Mike built. He has been a true friend to the entire genetics community, his leadership was invaluable and he will be greatly missed as he moves on to new frontiers.

—James P. Evans, MD, PhD, FACMG, former editor-in-chief of *Genetics in Medicine*



In this age of genomic medicine, it may be hard for some to remember when newborn screening was fragmented at a national level. Some states had no screening program or screened a minimum number of conditions. The same period in time was marked by prenatal screening that was at best targeted to one or a few ethnic groups. Medical foods were considered too expensive and were a luxury item for children with PKU and other metabolic conditions. Dr. Mike Watson was a key leader in the development of a nationally adopted newborn screening program. He guided one of the most important and first-ever collaborations between professional organizations. ACMG, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Academy of Pediatrics collaborated to establish laboratory standards when reporting cystic fibrosis variants and there was agreement on a uniform approach to panethnic prenatal carrier screening. He was a vocal advocate for the diagnosis and treatment of children with metabolic conditions. Mike did all of this and much more under the ACMG moniker. His collaborative leadership, tenacious spirit, focus and high intellect allows ACMG the worldwide status it enjoys today. We are the “go to” source for genetics and genomics information; the “go to” source for policy makers, patients and providers, because of Mike's leadership. We are proud members of ACMG. We can be proud to know that Mike leaves children with rare diseases, families seeking more information about their health risks and the nation positioned and equipped to take advantage of everything genomic technologies and their applications have to offer.

—Anthony R. Gregg, MD, MBA, FACOG, FACMG, president of the ACMG

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I have worked with Mike Watson over the years as a board member, College president, and now as Foundation president. His efforts to establish the College as the “go-to” authority on matters of medical genetics and genomics have been nothing short of Herculean. We all owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for his untiring efforts to advance our field, always with an eye towards what is best for the care of individuals and families who deal with rare or common genetic conditions every day.

—Bruce R. Korf, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG and current president of the ACMG Foundation for Genetic and Genomic Medicine

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R. Rodney Howell, MD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG and the ACMG Foundation, described the decision to hire Mike in 2000 as the College's first (and only) executive



Mike Watson is a force of nature. Without his extraordinary vision, expertise, drive, and political know-how the ACMG would not sit as the leader among genetics organizations. To use a basketball analogy, he had (and has) an incredible “sense of where you are” which has allowed him to position our organization right where it needs to be on most issues. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with him and for his friendship.

—Marilyn C. Jones, MD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

I have been a close friend, collaborator and “partner-in-crime” with Mike Watson since before ACMG even existed, when we were both assistant professors at our respective institutions, confronting the powers that be at AMA, FDA, CAP, CDC and many other professional and governmental agencies. Next to the founding of our College and the official recognition of our specialty, nothing has proven more consequential to the success of our mission than the appointment of Mike as executive director. Through his tireless efforts, ACMG quickly became and remains much more than a conglomeration of members with shared board certifications; it is the authoritative international voice on the diagnosis, treatment and public policy of genetic disorders and the promulgator of practice guidelines affecting tens of millions of people. While constantly juggling a dizzying array of administrative and advocacy roles, and securing enough extramural grant support to make any academic department envious, Mike has somehow never lost the personal touch, interacting with all ACMG members on a first-name basis even as our roster has grown exponentially. Thank you, Mike, for all you have done for us—now get some rest!

—Wayne W. Grody, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG



When we founded the ACMG and for the next half-dozen years, we shared a single administrative assistant with ABMG and ABGC. When I became the second president, we hired a full-time administrator. This progression convinced us that we needed an executive director with credentials in medical genetics. Fortunately for us as an organization, and for the many board members, committee chairs and members, our journal, and our grants management, Mike Watson joined us in this capacity. Over the past several decades, all aspects of the ACMG have benefited from his leadership. We will miss him.

—Reed E. Pyeritz, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

When I was asked in the fall of 2010 to serve as president-elect of ACMG, I really had only one major question: “Was Mike Watson planning to retire or leave in the next five years?” I could not imagine doing the job without access to his expertise, experience, knowledge and history for ACMG since its inception. Luckily, the answer was “no” and I happily agreed to serve again on the ACMG board. Mike has always been a visionary, anticipating what ACMG needs to do now and what will be needed in the next 5-10 years. Together we weathered adding “Genomics” to our name and the challenges regarding the publication of the secondary findings recommendations, amongst other important and high-profile endeavors. I could not have made it through my presidential term without him. Right or wrong, agree or disagree, he always put the College’s interests first. Thank you, Mike. We owe you both our respect and our gratitude.

—Gail E. Herman, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

Dr. Watson has been the name and face of ACMG for over 18 years. ACMG is the “go to organization for clinical genetics and genomics” and the role(s) that Dr. Watson played in that process is impossible to truly capture in words. He has given his heart and soul to making this happen. As one of the past presidents of ACMG, I have had the honor of working closely with him during my term, watching him easily wear multiple hats and serve multiple roles as CEO, chief development officer, principal grant investigator, patient and policy advocate at the federal, state and local levels, genetics historian and colleague. I have truly enjoyed working with such a remarkable individual. I thank the ACMG membership for providing me that opportunity.

—Gerald Feldman, MD, PhD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

As we look at the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics today, its accomplishments and the position it occupies in the world of genetics, it is impossible to imagine what the ACMG looked like when Mike Watson joined us as our first CEO. At the time, Mike was secure in operating his busy and successful genetics laboratory at one of our leading medical schools, Washington University in St. Louis. The ACMG was a small embryo of an organization, with a staff of one and a half persons. The small membership of ACMG had saved money from our dues in order to hire our first CEO. ACMG leadership had identified Mike Watson as the person we wanted for our CEO, and as president of ACMG at the time, it was my job to bring him aboard. I can’t imagine why he undertook such a remarkable challenge! We will, however, always recognize how lucky we are that he accepted our offer. Today ACMG is recognized as a leading organization in the entire field of medical genetics throughout the world. The accomplishments of ACMG are myriad and some work, like the development and standardization of newborn screening efforts, has been clearly lifesaving. The legacy that Mike leaves at ACMG as our founding CEO is remarkable and we are eternally grateful for where he has led us and all he has done.

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director saying, “As president of ACMG at the time, it was my job to bring him aboard. I can’t imagine why he undertook such a remarkable challenge! We will, however, always recognize how lucky we are that he accepted our offer. Today ACMG is recognized as a leading organization in the entire field of medical genetics throughout the world. The accomplishments of ACMG are myriad and some work, like the development and standardization of newborn screening efforts, has been clearly lifesaving. The legacy that Mike leaves at ACMG as our founding CEO is remarkable and we are eternally grateful for where he has led us and all he has done.”

“I appreciate the many opportunities I’ve been given and the important initiatives that were completed during my



Mike Watson is the singular person who led the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics to stability and enabled us to leverage ourselves to fulfill the role for which we always felt destined. As treasurer, I visualized firsthand the spreadsheets that showed us progressively going under, albeit at a gradual slope. Mike was on top of not accepting this potentially existential threat. The can could be kicked down the road until the extant officers rotated off, but Mike would have none of that. Instead, he asked us to place our future in the trust of a colleague—himself - who could take us in directions new to us. And make it happen. Among candidates for this pivotal new position, Mike stood out as knowledgeable in genetics and visionary as to where we needed to be. Of course, not every experiment works, but Mike’s ability to troubleshoot was so seamless that the Board often did not realize there had been a problem. We learned at the next call! Our organization has lots of co-founders, but Mike stands out as the klieg light. A special person scientifically and a special person administratively who truly made a difference. Thank you, Mike.

—Joe Leigh Simpson, MD, FACMG, past president of the ACMG

As a co-PI for the Clinical Genome Resource (ClinGen), an NIH-funded program that is building an authoritative resource for clinically relevant genes and variants, Mike plays a significant role in ensuring ClinGen is designed to serve the needs of the clinical genomics community. He is particularly skilled in identifying key stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, and setting the foundation for productive collaborations. Mike oversees a team that has been dedicated to getting ClinGen off the ground since Day 1 and we appreciate his involvement in many ClinGen activities, including the successful effort to become the first FDA recognized variant database.

—Erin Ramos, PhD, MPH, ClinGen program director, Division of Genomic Medicine, National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI)

Mike Watson is truly a visionary individual. Early in my acquaintance with Mike there were times when I wasn't sure where we were going. What I learned is that if I was patient and waited, the entire vision he presented initially emerged from all that we did after that. And, all of this was there in his thinking from the beginning. I have met very few people who have the capability of holding such large-scale projects in great detail as realized, conceptualized ideas. Mike has that gift. His influence on our profession has been profound, particularly in our advancement of newborn screening. Thank you, Mike, for all you have done!

—Susan A. Berry, MD, professor and director, Division of Genetics and Metabolism, Departments of Pediatrics and Genetics, Cell Biology & Development, University of Minnesota

employment as ACMG's Executive Director, said Dr. Watson. "I wish ACMG the best of success in the future."

Mike's leadership has been instrumental in many milestones for the College, including helping to establish ACMG as a professional membership organization and bringing laboratory geneticists into the ACMG—an achievement that unified the voices of clinical and



laboratory geneticists in service of the entire medical genetics team and the patients for whom they care. Mike has overseen a dramatic expansion in the financial resources and staff of ACMG, represented medical genetics, medical geneticists and ACMG to numerous government and professional entities, and helped increase the recognition of medical genetics as a primary clinical and laboratory specialty and establish ACMG as the preeminent authority on medical genetics and genomics. He directed a Maternal and Child Health Bureau-funded project that published recommendations for a national uniform panel of conditions for newborn screening entitled "Newborn Screening: Toward a Uniform Screening Panel and System." Currently, Mike serves as project director of the Health Resources and Services Administration-funded National Coordinating Center for the Regional Genetics Networks (NCC) and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver



Mike was instrumental in the development of the ACMG as an independent professional organization, taking it from an unrecognized group in organized medicine to the complex and fully engaged medical specialty society comparable to the other specialty society entities. Importantly, he persistently and methodically worked to get the medical establishment to recognize the relevance and importance of medical genetics and genomics as a critical part of healthcare services. He was fundamental in clinical genetics policy development, and he engaged in grant activities that complement and support the ACMG agenda. ACMG started down the hall from ABMGG and ASHG with only a handful of employees and Mike has built it into a respected and highly regarded entity. He has been a committed and steadfast supporter of the ABMGG—he has been my continued partner in this collaboration. I am honored to have him as a friend and will miss our ABMGG/ACMG partnership.

—Miriam G. Blitzer, PhD, FACMG, CEO of the American Board of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ABMGG)

I am delighted to have the opportunity to recognize Mike Watson and his remarkable contributions to newborn screening. Mike himself, and his leadership focus within ACMG, has been a long-time leader in this field. He deserves substantial credit for the early ACMG report on newborn screening, thereby publicly launching the College-supported minimum universal screening panel, as well as the understanding of additional conditions whose presence may be suggested through the screening. Subsequently he has been closely associated with the federal advisory committee on NBS that reports to HHS. Major contributions have been to provide the leadership of the NBSTRN and international efforts to support standardized infant testing worldwide. Congratulations and thank you.

—Nancy S. Green, MD, professor of pediatrics, associate director of the Irving Institute of Clinical Translational Science and associate dean of Academic Operations, Columbia University Irving Medical Center



It is an honor to write this tribute to Dr. Michael Watson—a friend, colleague, teacher, scholar, scientist, administrator, geneticist—in whatever role we know him, from whatever vantage point, he stands apart as a visionary. I first met Mike as I was beginning my career in the federal government and he was leading several government initiatives examining issues concerned with the delivery of genetic services. It was apparent that Mike was concerned with the evolution of genetic medicine and the ability of both the public and nongeneticists to grasp genetics' and genomics' important tenets. I began working with him because he had a gift of innovative thinking, a visionary spirit, and the tenacious patience required to successfully lead meaningful growth of the College, but also to incorporate genetics into public health and healthcare services. His work expanded the impact of the College and genetics on the broader society.

—Michele A. Lloyd-Puryear, MD, PhD, consultant, ACMG

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-funded Newborn Screening Translational Research Network (NBSTRN) Coordinating Center. He is also co-principal investigator on the National Human Genome Research Institute-funded Clinically Relevant Variants Resource grant, a subcontract of the Clinical Genome Resource (ClinGen) project. In 2011, the ACMG and ACMG Foundation presented Mike the inaugural Presidents' Award, to honor his contributions to the College.

Mike received his master's degree in medical genetics and his PhD in Physiology and Biophysics from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He completed his postdoctoral training at Yale University School of Medicine and is board certified by the American Board of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ABMG) in Clinical Cytogenetics and PhD Medical Genetics. Prior to becoming executive director of the ACMG and ACMG Foundation, Mike was Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the Clinical and Molecular Cytogenetics Laboratory at Washington University School

of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri. He had also served on the board of directors of ACMG and chaired several ACMG committees.

Bruce R. Korf, MD, PhD, FACMG, current president of the ACMG Foundation and past president of ACMG said, "I have worked with Mike Watson over the years as a board member, College president, and now as Foundation president. His efforts to establish the College as the "go-to" authority on matters of medical genetics and genomics have been nothing short of Herculean. We all owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for his untiring efforts to advance our field, always with an eye towards what is best for the care of individuals and families who deal with rare or common genetic conditions every day."

Celebrations of Mike's contributions to the College and ACMG Foundation will be held during the ASHG annual meeting and in the Bethesda area this fall.