



# *fellow*

## SPOTLIGHT:

**ERICA R. THALER, MD, FCPP**

*Fellow since 2004*

*By Jon Goff, Associate Director of Fellowship Relations*



**W**hen did you become a Fellow and what initially interested you about joining the College?

Actually, the first time I came to the College was in 1990 at the year-end dinner honoring the Surgical Chief Residents at Penn, when I was a surgical intern. This was when Dr. Clyde Barker was Chair at Penn and I believe he was also Chair of the Board of the College too. I was very impressed with the setting and loved the Mütter Museum. I became a Fellow after I joined the faculty at Penn some years later, at the encouragement of my Chair at the time, Dr. David Kennedy, and Dr. Bill Hanson, who with his father, had a long relationship with the institution. It obviously held such an important place in Philadelphia medicine, and I very much wanted to be a part of that.

**Tell us about your current appointments and your path to Penn Medicine.**

I am Professor and Vice Chair in the Department of Otolaryngology at Penn. I have been at Penn since 1990, having arrived for residency from Harvard Medical School. I joined the faculty after residency and have stayed ever since then. I have been lucky to have had a wonderful Department to work in over almost

three decades (!) led by two fabulous chairs, Dr. David Kennedy and Dr. Bert O'Malley, both of whom are Fellows of the College. So there has been no reason for me to consider a move.

**Recently, much of your research has been centered around upper airway stimulation (UAS) surgical implantation as a treatment for sleep apnea. Tell us more about this procedure and the results you've seen thus far.**

There has been tremendous innovation in the surgical management of sleep apnea over the past ten years or so. There used to be only limited and fairly mediocre surgical options for patients, but that has changed quite a bit. At Penn, Drs. Greg Weinstein and Bert O'Malley developed Trans Oral Robotic Surgery for Head and Neck Cancer, which I then began to use for patients with Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) as well, with good success. More recently, I have been involved with the implementation of hypoglossal nerve stimulation for treatment of OSA. This is an implantable device, like a pacemaker, which stimulates the hypoglossal nerve timed to a patient's inspiration. When the device fires, the tongue moves forward, re-opening the airway. It has had quite remarkable success so far, and saves patients the need for ablative surgery.

**What is one of your favorite items in the College Library or the Mütter Museum?**

Well as an Otolaryngologist, of course, I have to say the **2,374 foreign objects** inhaled or swallowed that were removed by Dr. Chevalier Jackson, one of the early giants in our field. His innovations were truly remarkable, and it is fun to see the record of his work in such a colorful way.

**As a newly elected Trustee, how do you hope to be involved in the present administration and future plans of the College?**

I look forward both to being part of the traditional aspects of the College, and also helping in whatever way I can to advance the College's future plans. Some of the more recent programmatic innovations at the College are very impressive, and poised to give the College a much wider audience that it has had in the past – I look forward to being a part of that expansion. ■



These objects were removed from the airways and digestive tracts of patients by Philadelphia otolaryngologist Chevalier Jackson, MD (1865-1958). Jackson developed methods and tools to remove impacted objects from people's passages and made many advances in the treatment of the head, neck, throat, and respiratory system. His carefully preserved collection of 2,374 objects ranges from pins and tacks to buttons, coins, medals, and toys (like the jacks and battleship seen here). Jackson donated the swallowed and inhaled foreign bodies to The College of Physicians in 1924, and they are on display at the Mütter Museum.