New chair gives Richards research flexibility

by Craig Boerner

A newly endowed chair in VUMC’s Section of Surgical Sciences is allowing the department to explore futuristic medical procedures such as implanting gastric pacemakers as a treatment for obesity and the possibility of performing endoscopic, incisionless surgeries.

William Richards, M.D., appointed Ingram Professor of Surgical Sciences, said the new funding stream will allow him to devote more time and effort to teaching, research and developing programs rather than concentrating solely on clinical practice and funded research projects.

"Dr. Richards is highly deserving of this honor. He is one of the most respected senior surgeons and professors on our faculty," said Dan Beauchamp, M.D., chair of the Section of Surgical Sciences.

"His clinical skills in complex, minimally invasive gastrointestinal surgery are second to none, and he is considered a national leader in this field. He is a valued teacher, and his efforts have been instrumental in resident and medical student education."

Beauchamp complimented Richards for his efforts in maintaining a competitive and extramurally funded clinical and translational research program for many years in his department.

The new chair will enable Richards to explore different aspects of surgery.

"I predict that we are going to see an explosion of minimally invasive surgical treatments for obesity, reflux disease, pre-cancerous lesions of the stomach and the esophagus, and in other areas of treatment of gastrointestinal diseases," Richards said.

"And this endowed chair will enable me to spend some time on these, what some people might say are outlandish, Star Wars-type treatments for the future. It enables me to explore these and start doing some of these treatments because I don’t have to do more cases, and I don’t have to only focus on things that generate money for the department or for our division."

Richards will be celebrating his 20th-year at Vanderbilt in August — a far cry from the “one-year” position he accepted when he came to Nashville from the University of Maryland in 1986 to do a fellowship in GI physiology with surgeon and mentor Lester Williams, M.D.

"When I accepted the job, I sat down in Chief of Surgery Dr. Sawyers’ office and he said, ‘Bill, this is a one-year position only. At the end of one year you will have to find another job. Don’t expect to stay for another year,’” Richards said.

“He repeated that probably about 10 times to make sure that I really understood it was only going to be for one year. And I said I understood. And the next year they asked me to stay on, and I’ve stayed here ever since.”

“The endowed chair also means something personally to me. It allows me to do more research and feel a little bit more able to do some teaching and do some other things that I am able to do. It also feels really good to have a personal recognition that I am someone that the Department of Surgery and the Irvingss believe they want to keep around at Vanderbilt," Richards said. “For longer than a year.”