It’s no surprise that many of Dr. Harold Pelzer’s patients consider him a friend. Pelzer, DDS, MD, is Chief of Head and Neck Surgical Oncology at the Lurie Cancer Center and Vice Chairman of the Department of Otolaryngology / Head and Neck Surgery at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. The genuine interest and compassion he has for everyone he treats is apparent. “The best part of being a physician and a surgeon,” he says, “is the relationship one has with their fellow man.”

Despite having practiced for 25 years, Pelzer is still touched and gratified by the doctor-patient relationship. “Total strangers come into your office and five minutes later they’re sharing their lives with you,” he says. For Pelzer, taking care of others is a privilege and a responsibility he embraces.

Most of Dr. Pelzer’s clinical practice is dedicated to head and neck cancers, challenging diseases that affect so much of a patient’s life. While any cancer can be extremely difficult for patients and their families to cope with, Pelzer says those with head and neck malignancies must often endure disfunction and deformity, as well as the more common issues of treatment side effects and fatigue. They may be unable to talk or swallow, and may even be disfigured, making everyday diversions, such as having a meal at a restaurant, especially difficult. “It’s really hard,” Pelzer says sympathetically. “Patients and family members have a lot to adjust to.” But, rather than being put off by these difficulties, Pelzer finds the challenges rewarding—an opportunity to interact with and help others.

From Dentistry to Medical School
A native of Chicago, Dr. Pelzer was always
interested in science and chose to major in biology when he attended Loyola University as an undergraduate. As he neared graduation, Pelzer knew he wanted to pursue a career in science but was undecided about which field to enter. He says he ended up taking the dental school entrance exam and was admitted to Loyola’s dental school the following year.

In dental school Dr. Pelzer’s interest in otolaryngology began to grow. “The more I was exposed to things outside the realm of restorative dentistry, such as cadaver dissections, the more interested I became in head and neck surgery,” he says. After graduating, Pelzer came to Northwestern to pursue a three-year residency in oral surgery. His residency was performed at Northwestern Memorial Hospital where he was able to participate in “some fairly big procedures.” He says, “the more I became involved with head and neck surgery, the more enamored I became with it.”

During his residency, Dr. Pelzer was fortunate to have met and been mentored by Dr. George Sisson, an internationally famous head and neck surgeon who was Chairman and Professor of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery at Northwestern at the time. This, says Pelzer, was the real turning point in his career. Dr. Sisson encouraged Pelzer to apply to medical school and pursue head and neck surgery. So, following his oral surgery residency, Pelzer entered Northwestern University’s School of Medicine where he graduated in 1979. He performed another residency in otolaryngology followed by a fellowship in head and neck surgical oncology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and joined the faculty of Feinberg in 1985.

While the fields intersect, most otolaryngologists do not have both an MD and a DDS degree. Asked how his dental school education has influenced his medical career, Pelzer says it has helped him become a better surgeon. “It may have given me a certain sophistication in that area,” he says.

Teaching the Next Generation
Pelzer says working with Northwestern’s exceptional medical students and residents is one of the most satisfying parts of his career. “It makes my days more enjoyable,” he says. “Year round, I get to work with a junior student on a daily basis for a month at a time. I really get to know my students and can hopefully make a difference in their careers.”

When he reflects on his own life as a student, Dr. Pelzer’s appreciation for Northwestern is apparent. “It was such a vibrant place and there was so much opportunity,” he says. And he believes the school has only gotten better since then. “The bar keeps getting raised higher on the students who are accepted” at the Feinberg School of Medicine, he explains. Pelzer says the students he now teaches no longer routinely come from a pre-med background, which used to be the norm. Instead, he has been delighted to find that many of them have majored in undergraduate disciplines as varied as journalism, anthropology, French, and economics. Some have even worked in other fields between their undergraduate years and medical school, which he says makes them especially multidimensional.

A Loyal “Wildcat”
Dr. Pelzer’s love for Northwestern extends to other members of his family. His son, Jack, graduated from the undergraduate program last year. “It was fun going up there to see him,” Pelzer says. “It’s just such a special place. The culture of the undergraduate school, the graduate schools, the hospital, and the medical school are great. It’s a wonderful, diverse, nurturing academic atmosphere.” (A loyal Wildcat, Dr. Pelzer even uses the team’s fight song as his cell phone ring tone.) “It was a tough call when Northwestern’s football team played Miami of Ohio, where my younger son, Owen, is a student. I love Miami, too, and we all had a great time at the game.”

Family Man
Asked what he is most proud of, Dr. Pelzer says it has been his ability to balance his medical career with his family life. Despite long hours, Pelzer says he has always tried to make family his highest priority and is happy he has managed to play an active role in both his wife’s and children’s lives. “As a physician, I don’t take that much time off, but when I do, I want to spend it with my family,” he says. Dr. Pelzer’s wife, Molly, also has a busy career as an attorney.

The Pelzers love to travel and have enjoyed several trips to some far-flung locals, including Kenya, Tanzania, the Baltics, Western Europe, and Alaska, among others.