Edward Valente ’97, a critical care registered nurse at Griffin Hospital, Derby, Conn., confers with his supervisor, Morgan D’Amore, RN.
One night in 1927, a New York University Medical School professor decided to check his anatomy lab to make sure all cadavers were covered after the day’s work. Opening the door, he was startled to find Frank Netter, notebook and colored pencil in hand, engrossed in an anatomical sketch. “You should be home studying,” the professor told Netter. “You will never pass the exam if you do not read the book.” But to Netter, just studying words in a book made no sense. He learned best from his pictures.

Netter did go on to become a surgeon and later, a world-famous medical illustrator whose pictures still inspire and teach medical students and others in the health care field. Fifty years after his professor’s admonishment, he was dubbed the “Michelangelo of Medicine” in a Saturday Evening Post article.

His more than 4,000 drawings have appeared in medical symposia, anatomy atlases and pharmaceutical company materials. Netter chronicled the emergence of open-heart surgery, organ transplants and joint replacements. In the early 1980s Dr. William DeVries asked him to be present at the first artificial heart transplant, a procedure that Netter illustrated in detail. His work is considered the gold standard for medical illustrations. Netter was still drawing and painting up until a year before he died in 1991 at the age of 85.

Netter’s first cousin, Edward Netter, and his wife, Barbara, decided to honor the artist by making a major gift to name Quinnipiac’s new medical school the Frank H. Netter, M.D., School of Medicine. A Fall 2013 opening is planned (see article on page 17).

“I can’t think of a better, more recognizable name in medical education than Netter, and so appropriate for a medical school,” said Dr. Bruce Koeppen, founding dean of the school. “I have to believe that every physician in the world at some point has used the illustrations Frank Netter created.”

As a first-year medical student at the University of Chicago, Koeppen studied Netter’s drawings in a series of atlases published by the Ciba Pharmaceutical Co. “Those atlases and others that came after are the choice of a majority of medical students because the student-friendly illustrations are comprehensive and clear, and Netter added color-coded sections and informational charts that others don’t have, to further the understanding of the material,” Koeppen noted.

“Edward was in admiration of the contributions made by Frank to medicine,” said Barbara Netter of her husband, who passed away in February 2011. Edward was the former chairman of Genève Corp., a financial services holding company. A significant philanthropist much of his life, he donated his time and resources to many charities involved with science, education and human services. In 2001, the couple founded the Alliance for Cancer Gene Therapy, the only public charity focused exclusively on cell and gene therapy research.
Illustrations in demand

In medical school, Netter's classmates would ask him to draw pictures for them to study, but they weren't the only ones. His professors also clamored for his drawings to augment their teaching materials and illustrate their publications, enabling the young artist to earn extra money to fund his education.

Netter's mother knew how much drawing meant to her son, but discouraged him from pursuing art as a career, suggesting medical school instead. And Netter himself presumed that when he became a doctor, he'd give up his artwork to devote himself to a surgical practice.

After an internship at New York City's Bellevue Hospital, Netter began his surgical practice in 1933, at the depths of the Great Depression, which had left people with little money for medical care. Netter's patient population dwindled, but he continued doing illustrations for doctors and pharmaceutical companies that needed pictures to explain the new drugs they were developing. One day, an advertising representative from a large pharmaceutical company asked Netter to make five pictures. With the intention of devoting more time to his medical practice, Netter tried to discourage the man by saying he would charge $300 for each of the pictures—he was getting about $50 per painting back then. But the ad representative misunderstood and called back to say the company would indeed pay $1,500 for each drawing! He picked up his paintbrush and never put it down.

Ciba Pharmaceutical contracted with Netter in 1937 to make pictures for literature it sent to physicians. In 1948, Ciba gathered almost 200 of the drawings into a book covering the anatomy, physiology and pathology of the human body. Netter also drew pictures for Ciba's "Clinical Symposia" booklet series on current research for many years. Ciba gave them to doctors to use as educational tools.

One Clinical Symposia featured Netter's pictures of the pioneering work of Michael DeBakey and his surgery of the aorta. Another focused on the work C. Everett Koop was doing in Philadelphia in the '50s, operating on newborns with congenital defects. Still another was DeVries' surgery of the first artificial heart implantation.

Francine Mary Netter remembers telling her father, "Dad, you are like Leonardo da Vinci," and he said, "No, I am not, because Leonardo did his own research with anatomy and I had the greatest doctors in the world help me."

Book tells his story

Netter's daughter has spent the past eight years writing a book about her father's illustrious life. The book is titled "Medicine's Michelangelo: The Life and Art of Frank H. Netter, M.D." "I thought he deserved to have a biography," she said.

"He worked long hours in his art studio in the family home in New York, then on Long Island, and later in Palm Beach. To me it seemed that he spent all his time painting, but for those pictures, 90 percent of his time was spent researching, thinking and planning. He appreciated that people appreciated his work, and he was happy he could make a contribution of this sort to medicine.Naming the medical school after him is a great tribute," she said.

The book, to be published later this year, contains plentiful details and anecdotes about Netter's life gleaned not only from the author's childhood memories, but from her father's autobiographical notes, and from numerous interviews with his colleagues, friends and family, including Edward Netter.

In 1952, Ciba contracted with Netter to illustrate a series of atlases, and he worked on those well into the 1980s. Concurrently in the mid-80s, the company commissioned Netter to work on what it described as a first-rate atlas of anatomy using his pictures. When it was published, Netter considered his "Atlas of Human Anatomy," now in its fifth edition, to be his crowning achievement, his "Sistine Chapel."


"I can't think of anyone who continues to have such a profound influence on generations of students, even after his mortal life," said Dr. Frederick Kaplan, the Isaac & Rose Nassau Professor of Orthopaedic Molecular Medicine and chief of orthopaedic molecular medicine at the Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania.

Kaplan worked with Netter for several years in the early 1980s on symposia booklets focusing on osteoporosis. He saw his first Netter picture while in high school, when his family physician gave him a copy
Construction on the Frank H. Netter, M.D., School of Medicine began in January on Quinnipiac’s North Haven Campus.

In October, St. Vincent’s Medical Center in Bridgeport, Conn., was named the principal clinical partner. Under the five-year agreement, St. Vincent’s medical staff is working with the leadership of the School of Medicine to design the clinical components of the curriculum and academic policies and procedures. Medical staff also will help recruit physicians to teach students.

The chiefs of service in St. Vincent’s various departments are serving as the chairs of the corresponding clinical departments in QU’s medical school. St. Vincent’s has the following medical specialties: anesthesiology, cardiovascular medicine, emergency medicine, family medicine, medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, oncology, pathology, pediatrics, psychiatry, radiology and surgery.

At the end of 2011, 14 faculty and senior staff members had been hired for the school. Dr. Bruce Koeppen, the founding dean, said the school will submit a wealth of information to the Liaison Committee on Medical Education in April covering course descriptions, the facility, finances, faculty, admissions and grading policies and disciplinary procedures. Koeppen anticipates a site visit from the LCME in June that he hopes will lead to preliminary accreditation in October.

“At that time, we will immediately begin recruiting the first class of students,” Koeppen said, adding that he is expecting a quality charter class. Koeppen plans to teach physiology.

He said the chance to create something where nothing exists is very appealing to new faculty members. “We are not constrained to an existing structure of courses, and we don’t have to break down barriers to introduce interprofessional activities,” he said. The Center for Interprofessional Healthcare Education has been created, and Koeppen calls it the driving force to create experiences in which students from the many health professions programs Quinnipiac offers will work together on cases.

of the 1948 book. “At that moment, the world of medicine burst into life—not through words but through pictures,” he said.

In 1981, Kaplan had just joined the Penn faculty and had completed his residency when his supervisor asked him to draft a paper on osteoporosis, a disease not as well known as it is today. The paper was mailed to Netter in Florida. Shortly afterward, Kaplan received a call from the artist.

“He called and said, ‘Hi, this is Frank Netter; have you heard of me?’ I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I said of course I had,” Kaplan said. Netter told Kaplan the material was more extensive than he had anticipated, and asked Kaplan if he would be interested in collaborating on a symposia booklet on the topic. Kaplan flew south to spend a week with Netter.

“I watched him draw and we would take walks together to discuss how to illustrate the material. He told me, ‘Freddie, when I make a picture, I have to understand the details. You can talk around a subject, but you can’t talk around a picture.’

A few years later, Kaplan helped Netter with three atlases on the musculoskeletal system. “I considered it a privilege to work with a legend like Dr. Netter. He was a master, and he produced masterpieces,” he said, noting that Netter became a mentor and great uncle of sorts, and they kept in touch over the years.

Netter was invited to speak at Penn’s centennial celebration of its Department of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1989. More than 1,000 people attended. “He was passionate about learning and education, and he came alive when he talked to medical students,” Kaplan said.

How does Kaplan think Netter would have reacted to the school being named for him?

“I picture him leaning back in his desk chair, taking a cigar from his humidor, puffing on it and saying something about needing to make more pictures. He would have been thrilled.”

Dr. Stuart G. Marcus, senior vice president and chief medical officer at St. Vincent’s, signs the clinical agreement while QU Deans Bruce Koeppen, center, and Edward O’Connor look on.