

Distinguished Medical Alumnus

Mark R. Denison, MD'80

Edward Claiborne Stahlman Chair and Professor of Pediatrics
Professor of Pathology, Microbiology & Immunology
Director, Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases
Vanderbilt University Medical Center



For over 30 years, Mark Denison has excelled as a pediatric physician-scientist working in infectious diseases, recognized nationally and internationally for his research, teaching and clinical contributions. And at no time is his work more relevant than right now.

Dr. Denison has studied coronaviruses, the family of viruses from which the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, since 1984. Prior to 2003 coronaviruses were known only as human cold viruses, and little considered potential pandemic pathogens. Dr. Denison, however, was intrigued by their complex biology and potential of coronaviruses for moving across species. Prior to the SARS-CoV epidemic in 2003, he discovered critical proteins of a model coronavirus as targets for inhibitors. In 2007, he discovered that coronaviruses are unique among RNA viruses in their ability to correct mistakes they make in copying their RNA when they replicate themselves. This was the basis for studies of antivirals, that began in 2013 and led to the development of two drugs against COVID-19, remdesivir and EIDD-2801, both currently in use for trials in humans.

His research and training program have been continuously NIH funded for over 30 years. Dr. Denison has published more than 120 articles in prestigious journals. He is also a Fellow of the Society for Pediatric Research, the American Pediatric Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, the American Academy of Microbiology, and the Association of American Physicians. He serves on national boards related to the biosafety and biosecurity of potential pandemic pathogens.

In addition, he is a superb instructor, having won teaching awards at both Thomas Jefferson University and at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where he has worked since 1991.

But he is and has always been a Jayhawk. His father, Terry Denison, MD, graduated from the KU School of Medicine in 1956. Dr. Mark Denison earned bachelor's degrees in chemistry and English from the University of Kansas in Lawrence before graduating from the KU School of Medicine in 1980.

In his letter nominating Dr. Denison for this award, Barney Graham, MD, senior investigator at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Vaccine Research Center, noted that "he hangs his JayDoc needlepoint in his office and shares with all who visit his pride in his KU training. I can think of no one who better manifests the goals and spirit of KU in his life and career."

For his seminal contributions to research, clinical medicine, and patient care, as well as his outstanding teaching of research physicians, the KU Medical Alumni Association is proud to present the Distinguished Medical Alumnus Award to Mark R. Denison, MD'80.