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AGA SECTION

Our New President—M. Bishr Omary, MD, PhD, AGAF



M. Bishr Omary, MD, PhD, AGAF

We are delighted and honored to come together and introduce our friend and colleague, the incoming president of the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) Institute, Dr M. Bishr Omary, who starts his 1-year term at Digestive Disease Week 2020. It took 5 of us (and more beyond us) to compile all of this information because each of us has had the joy of working closely with Bishr for at least 10 years (in some cases 30 years!) and have known him in very different settings.

Childhood and Family Life

M. (Mohammed) Bishr Omary was always called by his middle rather than first given name, as is typical in the Middle East, because Mohammed (spelled at least 8 different ways) is the most common first name in the Middle East and is given by parents with the hope that their son will become a good person. The eldest of 3 siblings, Bishr was born in New York City, where his Syrian parents, Ibrahim and Dalal Omary, raised him for 5 years before the family returned to Damascus, Syria. His parents came to New York City because his dad attended graduate school at Columbia University, where he obtained an MS degree in political science (he had a law degree in Syria but did not practice law), supported by a Syrian scholarship. His dad also worked at the United Nations while going to school. Back in Syria, his dad worked with the Ministry of Urban Planning. His younger two siblings, a sister, Nashwa Ulsaker, and a brother, Reed, were born in Damascus (Photo 1A and B). His

parents emigrated to the United States in 1968, knowing the opportunities their kids would have in the future, although it was challenging to find work initially. When asked about their decision to return to the United States, Bishr says, “I am eternally grateful to my parents from whom I learned the meaning of hard work and unconditional love. The opportunities in the US open so many doors compared with many other countries, including Syria then and especially now given the ongoing 9-year civil war that has ravaged the country.”

Bishr’s brother Reed also became an academic physician (no family history of physicians) and is now Chair of Radiology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and his sister (both brothers agree that she the smartest of the siblings!) worked as a commercial property manager and is happily helping, together with her husband Ken, care for their 5 grandchildren. When Reed was asked by us to give some insights about Bishr he remarked, “As my older brother, Bishr instilled many important values in me. One of those values has been to be kind and generous. For instance, Bishr has always been the first to offer to pay for everyone’s meal, even if there is a large party going out for dinner. Second, he considers a good sense of humor essential. Filling sugar containers with salt, placing toothpaste on combs, and gifting a cut-up spaghetti-stained polyester tie were considered normal everyday activities in our family because of Bishr. Finally, Bishr exemplified the value of hard work, and the sense of duty that underlies that work ethic. After all, it was Bishr who taught me as a 10-year-old boy that it



Photo 1. (A) Dalal (Bishr's mom) with her 3 children (right to left: Bishr, Nashwa, and Reed); (B) Ibrahim and Dalal Omary (Bishr's parents) with their 3 children; (C): Souha and Bishr with their children, Jill and Joe, taken at Joe's graduation from high school.

was normal to spend evenings in the lab. Of course, he has taught those same values to many others!"

Bishr met his wife Dr Souha Hakim, an exceptional pediatrician, in 2010 and they married in 2012. Souha runs a solo practice and is now taking care of the second generation of the children she cared for when she first started. For the last 2 years, she has spent time as part of a medical mission that provides care in an underserved region in Guatemala and she will likely be spending more of her future time involved in such activities. Souha and Bishr are now "empty nesters," as their children Jill and Joe (Photo 1C) are pursuing their career goals. Jill is presently working in a laboratory while deciding whether to apply to graduate or medical school, while Joe is in graduate school and pursuing training in biomedical large data analysis. When asked about her husband, Souha said "Bishr is an amazing scientist, an extremely hard-working person while caring about every individual who works with him to the finest detail; mentoring and supporting them in every aspect of their lives."

The 9 years that Bishr spent in Syria still bring him fond memories. When he left New York City for Damascus he spoke only English; as a youngster, he learned Arabic quickly but lost the English he knew because no one around him spoke it. At that time, the educational system required everyone to take a foreign language class starting in 7th grade (Russian, French, or English). He was allowed to enroll in the English class (because he knew how to count to

10 and convinced the principal, who apparently looked the other way!); otherwise he could have been assigned 1 of the other 2 languages. Starting in 7th grade, he became interested in chemistry after acquiring a chemistry textbook from his 12th-grade neighbor. At the age of 12 years, he set up a "lab" in a small storage room that was on the roof of the building he lived in, and recalled using his limited allowance and any holiday gift money to buy chemicals that, surprisingly, were available in the marketplace and sold to a young, clueless kid. Had his parents knew he was mixing sodium with water to generate hydrogen gas, they would have put an immediate stop to it! Now we know what Reed meant in his quote.

Upon moving to the United States in September 1968, his father enrolled him in 10th grade at Washington Lee High School in Arlington, VA. Although his English writing and speaking skills were limited, Bishr convinced the chemistry teacher (Thomas H. Christie Sr, also a Baptist minister and chair of the high school science department), after naming all the elements of several rows of the periodic table (which he had studied on his own in Syria), to allow him to take chemistry as a sophomore (usually recommended for seniors). Bishr did very well in this class, and that led Mr Christie to ask him to be his chemistry laboratory class assistant, which Bishr did during his junior and senior years. During his junior year and the summer prior, Bishr worked at McDonald's and then worked full-time during his senior school year in a Marriott Hot Shoppes

restaurant (as dishwasher, busboy, cook, waiter, and cashier). Getting home at midnight was not compatible with good grades, but it was his chemistry professor and the fact that he was a starter on the high school soccer team that led to his acceptance to George Mason College (1 year before it became George Mason University) as a chemistry major. His first 2¹/₂ years at Mason focused on playing college soccer (he was good enough to have a 50% tuition scholarship during his last 2 years) and working at the Hot Shoppes restaurant, where he was asked to enroll in manager school. Fortunately, he made the strategic decision to spend more time in the library and less time playing foosball and table tennis in the student union; that simple maneuver completely transformed his grades (his GPA was barely 2.0). Here again, it was another mentor, Dr Wayne Stalick, his organic chemistry professor and volleyball coach (Bishr also played college volleyball), who took him under his wing and advocated for him to be accepted at the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) and Duke University PhD programs in chemistry; Bishr selected UCSD, and little did he know that this decision would be transformative.

Graduate Education and Training

Soccer came into the picture again. Playing with one of the San Diego City soccer league teams, Bishr met Dr Ian Trowbridge (who played fullback; Bishr was a midfielder), who asked him to join his lab as a graduate student. Ian, a young assistant professor at the Salk Institute, did not have a joint faculty appointment at UCSD to allow him to be Bishr's PhD mentor, but this was solved because Robert Holley (Ian's postdoctoral mentor and a 1968 Nobel Laureate for isolating transfer RNA and mapping its structure) was professor at the Salk Institute and UCSD and agreed to be a secondary mentor for Bishr. Working in the Trowbridge Laboratory took Bishr away from hardcore bioinorganic chemistry to cell and cancer biology. As a PhD student, Bishr published 4 articles (including 2 in *Journal of Experimental Medicine* and 1 in *Nature*) and then stayed for 1 extra year in Ian's laboratory as a postdoc to complete some unfinished work and publish 5 additional articles. The most impactful discovery made by Bishr while in the Trowbridge laboratory was the novel identification and characterization of the transferrin receptor. Simply remarkable!

Working with leukemia samples obtained from Dr Jun Minowada at Roswell Park Cancer Institute during his PhD turned Bishr toward medicine, so he applied to medical school and was accepted to the 2-year MD-to-PhD program at the University of Miami (which was in place from 1971 to 1987). Bishr will tell you that persistence paid off because it took him 3 attempts to gain acceptance. No one read his application initially because of his low undergraduate school GPA, despite his record as a graduate and postdoctoral student and letters of recommendation from 2 Nobel Laureates from the Salk Institute (it is easier to become an AGA member, so to you readers, please apply to join the AGA if you are not a member!). Bishr did his internal medicine residency training at University of California-Irvine, where he was awarded the Intern of the Year

honor after completing his internship because of how he excelled at patient care. Bishr credits his residency program director, Dr David Powers, for allowing him to start his gastrointestinal (GI) fellowship at UCSD 6 months early, at a time when short-tracking was not common. His fellowship at UCSD (1987–1989) was under the tutelage of the late Dr Jon Isenberg and the laboratory mentorship of the late Dr Martin Kagnoff, both GI luminaries. Bishr also credits Jon and Marty for being huge advocates and supporters of his training and academic career. During his GI fellowship, Bishr was also able to spend 3 months in Royal Liverpool University Hospital in England as an “honorary senior registrar” under the mentorship of Sir Ian Gilmore (through a fortuitous meeting with Dr Gilmore during the 1988 Digestive Disease Week, arranged by Dr Samuel Marcus, who had previously trained at the Liverpool GI unit). He remains thankful for the opportunity provided to him by Dr Gilmore to learn and perform endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (a “closet” interventionalist endoscopist, in case any reader wants to recruit Bishr!) and laser treatment for GI cancers; he is also grateful to have met his gracious hosts, Drs Ian and Sharon Finnie (gastroenterologist and family physician, respectively), who welcomed him to share a “flat” with them. After being totally spoiled in the United Kingdom, as he fondly recalls, Bishr returned from England in May 1989 and lived with his close friend (and UCSD co-GI fellow) Craig Chow and Craig's wife, Paula, for 6 weeks before driving to Palo Alto to start his faculty position at Stanford University. He has not forgotten the fresh, daily, home-cooked meals that they graciously provided! When Dr Steve Pandol, who was one of Bishr's GI attendings during his GI fellowship training, was asked what he recalled about Bishr, he stated “Bishr joined our GI fellowship training program at UCSD and worked with Marty Kagnoff during his fellowship and published 4 first author manuscripts (including one in *Science*). He would finish his clinical duties during the day and go the lab and continue his experiments and making discoveries at night. At the time he was finishing his GI fellowship, he indicated to us that he wanted to learn advanced endoscopic techniques. We didn't offer this training at UCSD to research-oriented fellows and we wondered why Bishr wanted further clinical training in endoscopy as he was slated to have an exceptional laboratory-based academic career. However, Bishr persisted and spent 3 months in an outstanding clinical unit in Liverpool. Never did I think he was doing this because he would become a leader of the entire GI community. From the days of his fellowship to now, he is always extraordinary polite, gracious and giving. He sets a model and standard for all of us in the field.”

Stanford University Years

In early 1989, the Stanford GI division had just undergone a change in leadership with the appointment of Dr Harry Greenberg as its new division chief. Harry took over for Dr Gary Gray, who had ably overseen that division for the previous 17 years. Bishr was 1 of 3 young laboratory-based gastroenterologists recruited to Stanford by Harry

in the late 1980s as part of a plan to grow that division. Bishr's research credentials were unusually strong for a newly minted GI fellow and his highly laudatory recommendations for research potential (and clinical prowess) from the late Drs Kagnoff, Isenberg, and Trowbridge proved prescient. In short, Bishr was a division chief's and department of medicine chair's dream recruit; he came to Stanford having just completed his GI fellowship with a US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Merit Award, a VA Career Development Award, and a Pew Scholar Award, so the division chief did not need to worry about him for at least 4 years!

With the benefit of hindsight, Bishr's recruitment was very fortuitous for Stanford GI and for gastroenterology in general, as he went on to distinguish himself as a world leader in the field of cytoskeletal intermediate filament protein research, where he initiated his pioneering biochemical studies of keratins, while moving these studies from the purely cell/molecular/genetic realm to the clinic and bedside. His research, which was directed initially by a genetic mouse model that his group developed, led to the identification of select keratin variants as risk factors for acute and chronic liver disease progression, which was published in several high-profile journals, including the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Gastroenterology*, *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. He became one of the elite translational scientists who has been able to carry his investigations bidirectionally between the bench and the bedside.

Bishr quickly rose through the academic ranks to full professor by 2001 due to his substantial scholarly activity, excellent skills as a clinician, and his natural abilities to excel as a leader and organizer. Highlights of his remarkable tenure at Stanford include having served as Chief of the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology (the name of the division changed under his tenure from the Division of Gastroenterology to its current name), as the director of Stanford's National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded GI Training grant, and as the Co-Director and then Director of Stanford's NIH-funded multidisciplinary Digestive Disease Center for 8 years before his departure in 2008 to the University of Michigan (UM). Not only did Bishr excel in his administrative activities at the local level, but he also took on a variety of national and international leadership roles. For example, he was selected as Vice Chair, then Chair, of the prestigious Gordon Conference on Intermediate Filaments. He also co-chaired a symposium on intermediate filaments for the American Society for Cell Biology, served the AGA in several capacities (see below), and was the Continuing Medical Education Course Director (Advances in Gastroenterology for the Primary Care Physician) for 4 years. And finally, during his stint at Stanford, he served as an Associate Editor for both *Molecular Biology of the Cell* and *Gastroenterology*.

Despite his major administrative roles and his active participation in committees and organizations in and outside the university, Bishr successfully maintained a remarkably productive research laboratory. Some areas of his investigation while at Stanford included the following:

- (1) identification of keratin mutations in patients with liver disease;
- (2) defining the function and regulation of keratins by a multitude of post-translational modifications and associated protein interactions in digestive organs;
- (3) development of transgenic animal models of human disease;
- (4) co-discovering one of the keratins as a unique biomarker for hepatocyte death, which is currently used worldwide in clinical trials;
- (5) defining the molecular mechanism and dynamics of Mallory-Denk body formation (formerly Mallory bodies; he led their renaming effort, which is now internationally accepted, which our hepatologists and pathologists will recognize); and
- (6) defining the potential utility of heme oxygenase-1 as a therapy target in experimental and human pancreatitis. He also collaborated closely with his friend Dr George Triadafilopoulos, whereby their groups defined the importance of acid and bile in the molecular alterations that take place during Barrett's esophagus.

Commensurate with his broad and deep scientific focus and remarkable scholarly productivity during his Stanford tenure, Bishr was highly successful in obtaining peer-reviewed grant support. During his Stanford years, he was supported by 11 different NIH-funded R-type grants, by a long-running VA Merit Review Grant, and by 2 sequential VA Career Development Grants, to which he attributes cementing his academic and research success. Near the time he departed to UM he held 2 NIH R01 grants, a VA Merit Award (function and dysfunction of intermediate filaments in the digestive system), an NIH R25 (making a digestive disease career palatable), and was co-principal investigator of an NIH R01 (epithelial refluxate interactions in Barrett's esophagus). Importantly for the Stanford GI division, before his departure to Michigan he had co-spearheaded the acquisition and direction of a highly coveted NIH Digestive Disease Center Grant for 2 continuous segments (10 years). Of note, Bishr's success in research and in securing peer-reviewed research funding was legendary at Stanford. The rumor among GI and other postdoctoral trainees and among his colleagues was that he was only able to do this because he had a sleeping bag in his office (we think he took it to UM and then Rutgers!). Most impressively, Bishr accomplished all of this while always being available for his trainees and colleagues, and while taking on patient care, which he enjoyed and at which he was equally adept. He was the only physician-scientist gastroenterologist at Stanford who also managed therapeutic endoscopy cases while on clinical service or call, and he even took call the very last week as he was departing to UM.

One of Bishr's most important attributes during his time at Stanford was his selfless focus on helping develop and enhance the careers of the GI division trainees and faculty. He set high expectations for the GI fellows, but worked relentlessly to promote their careers. For the latter he received the 2005 Teaching Award from the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology. Among his past research trainees is Aida Habtezion, who now is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Stanford and an outstanding investigator in her own right. Dr Habtezion captured well Dr Omary's remarkable qualities as a mentor: "I always say and



Photo 2. Stanford University GI division faculty and fellows gather during a 2002 visit by past AGA President Jon Isenberg (1), joined by past Presidents Martin Brotman (2), Emmet Keeffe (3), then Division Chief Bishr Omary (4), and past Division Chief and current Senior Associate Dean for Research Harry Greenberg (5), who recruited Bishr to Stanford University.

know that I am where I am today because of the mentorship and guidance I received from Bishr. His door was always open as was his email and any means that you could imagine of reaching him. This still stands even at this stage of my career, he remains my career-line to call! He is the most generous, humble, inclusive, and devoted mentor that I have come across in my career and I will forever be grateful." Dr Anson Lowe was a colleague and long-term friend of Bishr's throughout his tenure at Stanford. Anson stated: "From my perspective, among Bishr's most endearing and admirable qualities was his amazing energy and enthusiasm. I would frame him as the 'Duracell Rabbit' of Stanford. While Bishr was the GI/Hepatology division chief he recruited a number of outstanding young faculty. Among them was Dr Jeff Glenn, who is now a highly successful translational scientist." When asked about Bishr's impact on his career, Jeff said: "Probably one of the most influential impacts Bishr had on me was convincing me that Stanford would be the best place to launch my career as a physician-scientist. And he could not have been more right! There is no more enabling place for those wishing to translate their science into new diagnostics and therapies, and I think of Bishr each time I pass this forward as part of my passion of training the next generation of physician-scientists." He also recruited a number of clinically focused faculty, including Aijaz Ahmed, now one of the leaders of the liver transplantation team at Stanford. As Aijaz recalled, "Bishr was an exemplary GI

Chief! He sincerely cared about the career of all the members of our division."

As division chief (1999–2003), Bishr recruited outstanding faculty (Drs Aijaz Ahmed, Subhas Banerjee, Shai Friedland, the late Lauren Gerson, Jeffrey Glenn, Mindie Nguyen, and Jacques Van Dam) and worked very closely with past AGA president, the late Dr Emmet Keeffe (who was chief of the hepatology section within the GI division and medical director of liver transplantation; [Photo 2](#)) and with the liver transplantation team led by Dr Carlos Esquivel. He also worked closely with local and community gastroenterologists, some of whom were past Stanford faculty (Drs Samuel Marcus and Harvey Young) and members of the Palo Alto Clinic (Dr Paul Rubinstein) and Santa Clara Kaiser (Dr Joanna Ready), among others who generously provided their time for clinical teaching.

Bishr quickly emerged as an exemplary professional during the earliest phase of his remarkable career. Aside from his accomplishments highlighted here, and while at Stanford, he received the Young Investigator Award from Western Society for Clinical Investigation (1993) and was inducted into the American Society for Clinical Investigation (1995) and the Association of American Physicians (2008). His work ethic, guided by his persistence, foresight, selflessness, good nature, and creativity were apparent from the very start of his assistant professorship at Stanford. During his 19 years at Stanford, he was known for his most

collegial, unassuming, and pleasant interactions and, at the same time, exacting the highest of standards not just from those he works with but also from himself. It is not a surprise that after he left Stanford University, Bishr continued to be stellar in leadership positions at the UM, and now at Rutgers University and the AGA. When asked about his time at Stanford, Bishr replied “I thank Harry (Greenberg) for supporting me for the past 30 years, while at Stanford, Michigan and Rutgers. He provided me with so many opportunities including passing along the GI chief position and the PIship of the NIH training and center grants. I still fondly recall when he picked me up from the airport with his beat-up VW when I first interviewed (VW was my first car, so I immediately liked him). Harry’s lab was next to mine; simply put, he was a role model to me.” In addition to all of the friends that Bishr made while at Stanford, he mentions that he is always thankful to his GI fellowship friend, Craig, for introducing him to his parents, Chris and Rowena Chow, who represented a second family to him.

University of Michigan Years

In 2008, Bishr was recruited to the UM to serve as Chair of the Department of Molecular and Integrative Physiology, where he followed Dr John A. Williams, who chaired the department for 21 years. Bishr was also appointed as Pollard Professor of Medicine in the Department of Internal Medicine. The physiology department had been interested in recruiting an MD, PhD to guide the department into translational studies. Bishr fit the bill and performed in a spectacular manner, recruiting a number of young and established tenure-track faculty, including Drs Daniel Beard, Christian Burgess, Howard Crawford, Carol Elias, Jun Hee Lee, Scott Leiser, Malcolm Low, Suzanne Moenter, Yatrik Shah, Jun Wu, Lei Yin, William Rainey, Costas Lyssiotis, and Ling Qi. He was a master of forming partnerships with interdisciplinary units that made the recruitments to physiology possible, including the Center for Aging, the Cancer Center, the Cardiovascular Center, the Endocrine Oncology Center, the Department of Internal Medicine and several of its divisions, and the Departments of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Emergency Medicine. Most of these outstanding recruited faculty brought grants with them, and all secured grants upon joining the department. As the department grew to 38 faculty in 2017, it became the NIH’s top-funded physiology department in the United States (!) to go with its already long-standing stellar reputation. It was also the biggest and most well-funded basic science department at the UM. Bishr also continued the tradition of appointing joint faculty, primarily from the Department of Medicine, including Dr Chung Owyang who played an important role in recruiting Bishr to Michigan. At the time he stepped down from his role as chair, the Department included 85 primary and joint faculty. Dr John Carethers, recently selected AGA Vice President and current Chair of Medicine at the UM stated when asked about Bishr “I knew of Bishr’s great reputation when I was GI Chief at UCSD due to his past training there, and his leadership at Stanford as head of GI. Little did I know that I would work directly with him with

his recruitment to Michigan in 2008 and my recruitment there in 2009. There, I directly witnessed Bishr’s under-the-radar demeanor but extremely hard-working ethic behind the scenes. We forged ideas along with Dr Chung Owyang, Chief of GI, with Bishr as the driver that led to Michigan hosting the editorship of Gastroenterology. Bishr is one of the most well-rounded academic physicians you will find, having been a leader of a clinical GI Division and a chair of a basic science department, guiding MDs and PhDs toward excellence in the care of patients, conducting innovative research, and educating fellows, pre- and post-docs for their craft. Bishr is very thoughtful, has an incredible ability to complete multiple tasks on time, elevates the mood and pulls out the best capabilities of people he recruits and interacts with. I certainly am thrilled for Bishr leading the AGA, and I know that the whole GI and liver community is in good hands with Bishr guiding our organization.”

From the educational and training perspectives, Bishr established a physiology MS degree-granting program that became a role model master’s program in the medical school, and he helped grow a summer research program for undergraduate students who were recruited from across the United States, which was supported in part by 2 NIH R25 grants, 1 for underrepresented minority students. In addition, he co-directed an NIH K12 program that supports training of postdoctoral fellows in research as well as teaching at partner community colleges with a high percentage of students with minority backgrounds. Bishr also ran a successful NIH- and VA-funded research laboratory and collaborated widely with other faculty. He was admired and respected by the department, as he had an almost monastic dedication to the department and became its most vocal booster (Photo 3). We take some credit for what took place in Ann Arbor in 2012, when he met and married his wife Souha.

Bishr’s other major legacy was establishing a number of endowed chairs in the physiology department. When he arrived, there were no endowed chairs in the department and the Department of Internal Medicine appointed him as the H. Marvin Pollard Professor of Gastroenterology Chair upon his recruitment. He obtained matching funds as part of his chair package, which were leveraged to raise additional philanthropic gifts from generous donors to establish 7 endowed “collegiate professorships,” all given to existing faculty, in addition to 2 that he initiated, which have been completed by his successor as Chair, Santiago Schnell. Bishr always loved masterminding the installation ceremonies and he developed to a fine art the technique of morphing the recipients face into that of the past professor for whom the Chair was named. He was also instrumental in setting up additional endowments, 1 for PhD graduate students (that reached \$1 million), 2 to provide scholarships for MS degree students, and 1 for an undergraduate summer research program that is intended to promote the spirit of diversity.

He was also very fond of the department’s annual picnic and student-faculty softball game. He was not the biggest or the best player, but he was the most enthusiastic booster of the faculty team, which won most often. There was always 1 extra “player” on the faculty team, and that was Bishr’s



Photo 3. Faculty of the University of Michigan Medical School Department of Molecular and Integrative Physiology (2012).

trash-talking. He and his wife Souha were very generous in using their home for student recruiting dinners and hosting periodic and popular “Night at the Academy,” where renowned faculty from within and outside the department spoke on issues of general interest.

Another area leading to his popularity was that he liked to buy and provide food to the department and especially the office staff, although he never ate much himself. He befriended a couple that ran a Japanese-French pastry business (Café Japon) and we in the department often enjoyed the fruits of their labor. Maybe it is his GI genes, but Bishr strongly believed that good food helps make a good department. However, he received his comeuppance one time when he organized a faculty lunch to celebrate recent promotions and the next day everyone came down with gastroenteritis. For several years after that when he suggested food, people reminded him not to use that caterer. This, however, did not stop him because he still provided lunch during the weekly conference calls during his term as Editor-in-Chief of *Gastroenterology* (see below). These latter lunches were provided by Zingerman’s, the most famous deli west of the Hudson River, and many had to fight off weight gain.

During his time at Michigan, Bishr received numerous honors. These include selection as Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellow, 2013; the awarding of 3 mentorship awards (AGA 2014 Liver and Biliary Section Mentor Award, the 2014 Michigan Institute for Clinical & Health Research Distinguished Clinical and Translational Research Mentor Award, and the 2015 AGA Distinguished Mentor Award); the 2015 Jacobaeus

International Prize (established in 1939 and given annually by the Novo Nordisk Foundation in the fields of physiology or endocrinology); and the 2016 Horace W. Davenport Distinguished Lectureship from the Gastrointestinal & Liver Section of the American Physiological Society. Bishr also served as Study Section regular member and then chair (2018–2019) of the NIH Clinical, Integrative and Molecular Gastroenterology Study Section. The multiple mentoring awards Bishr has received do not come close to highlighting the impact he has had on the careers of faculty, department trainees, and his own laboratory members over the years (Photo 4). Furthermore, in terms of postdoctoral training, Bishr was the first in our medical school to establish a postdoctoral club with a dedicated director, akin to a PhD program director, that focused on career development of the department postdocs (see Omary et al¹). This program was replicated in several departments at the UM Medical School.

In 2017, Bishr was appointed as Chief Scientific Officer and Executive Vice Dean for Research in the UM Medical School and he stepped down from his departmental chair role. He continued to maintain his laboratory and an office in the department although after his conversion to the dark side, you often had to come in on weekends or stay after hours to see him. Asked about his 11 years at Michigan, he replied “The UM physiology department and the GI division communities became my extended family. The support and sounding board roles that John Williams provided when I began as a new chair were priceless. In addition, working with Drs. John Carethers, Chung Owyang, and Anna Lok allowed us to establish GI research as one of the major areas of strength in the medical school and to making it possible

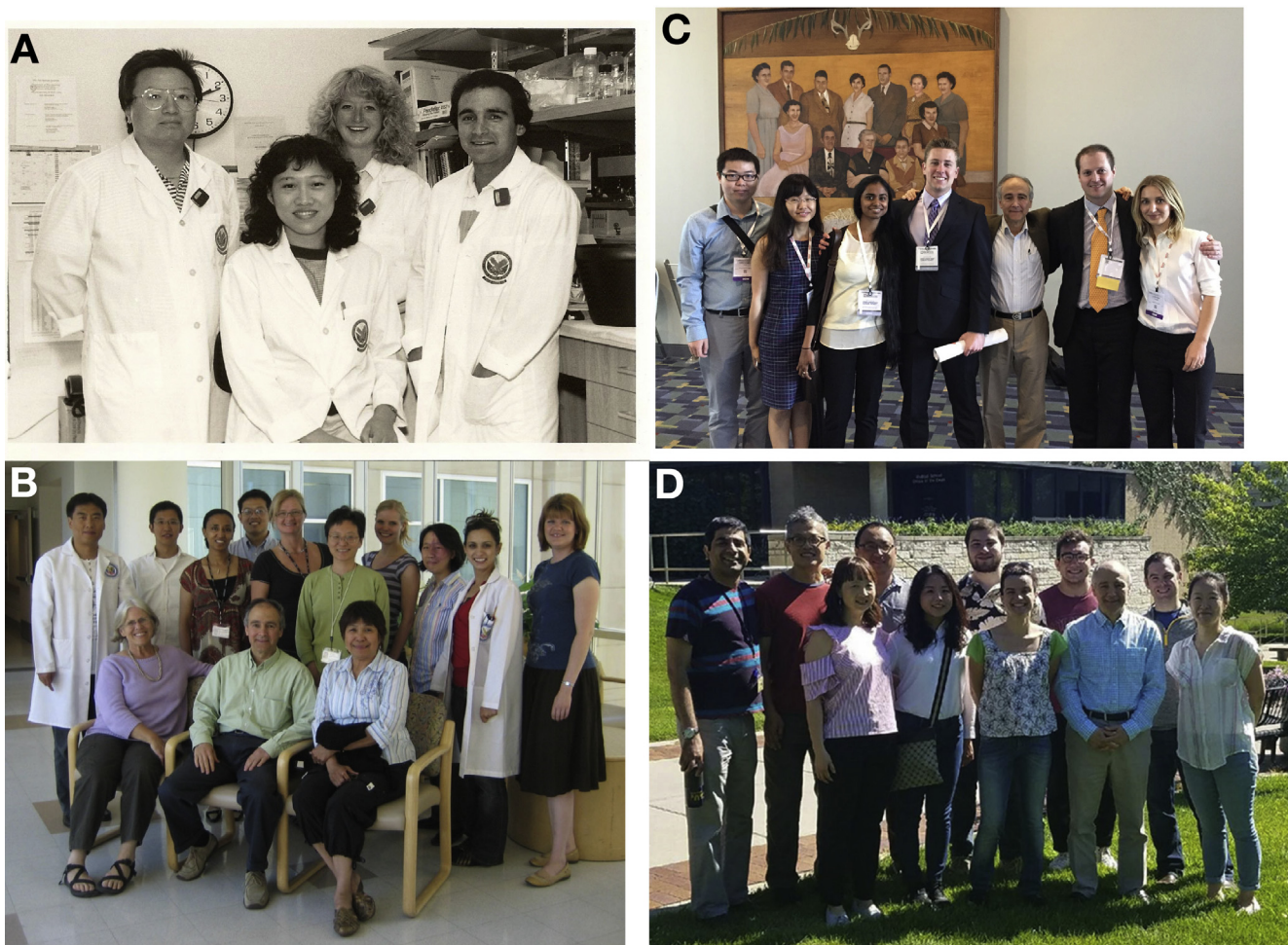


Photo 4. The Omary laboratory members in early days of 1992 (A), 2008 (B), 2015 during Digestive Diseases Week (C), and 2018 (D).

to successfully bring *Gastroenterology* from 2011 to 2016 to the UM.” When it was announced the Bishr was being recruited to Rutgers University, the Department of Physiology established the “Bishr Omary Physiology Postdoctoral Awards & Symposium Fund” endowment as a tribute and recognition of his tremendous contributions to the department and school during the 11 years he spent there. Not surprisingly, this fund has already accumulated more than \$230,000 and continues to grow, with major contributions made by the basic sciences departments, internal medicine, gastroenterology, and several other clinical departments, divisions, and centers that he worked closely with, in addition to generous gifts made by the physiology department faculty, students, and staff with whom Bishr served.

American Gastroenterological Association Activities

Bishr has been a longtime and engaged member of the AGA. First joining in 1992, he has provided his expertise and insight for many programs, activities, committees, and conferences. In addition to serving on the GI Research, Manpower & Training, Education & Training, and Research

Policy Committees, he chaired the Research Awards Panel, which facilitates the peer review of all AGA research awards and abstract-based travel awards. Bishr has always been a strong advocate for research funding and trainee support and demonstrated this passion while serving as the committee chair. He worked with AGA research staff and Drs Maria Abreu, Richard Boland, and Vincent Yang to secure an NIH 5-year R25 grant (the first of its type to the AGA) that supported the AGA to develop an undergraduate summer research program for underrepresented minority students to help grow the biomedical research pipeline and raise interest and stimulate potential careers in digestive health and disease research.

Perhaps Bishr’s most remarkable achievement with AGA was his decade-long service to *Gastroenterology*. He first served as Associate then Senior Associate Editor for the *Journal* from 2006 to 2011, where he oversaw the peer-review process of nearly 700 manuscripts. During those years, Bishr demonstrated his commitment to fair and rapid reviews, always carefully evaluating each manuscript, providing constructive comments to authors, and guiding strategic initiatives and paving the way for the future.

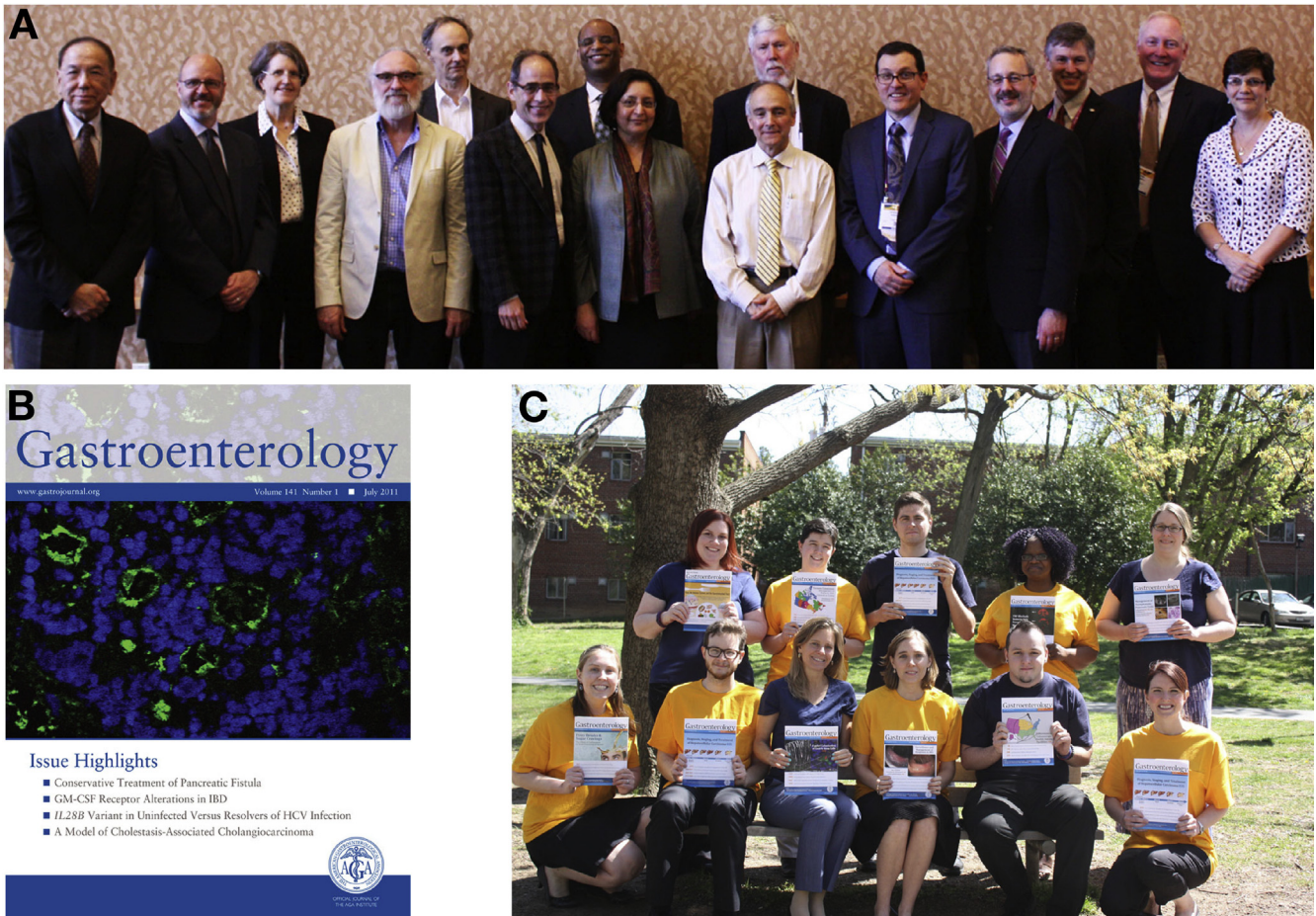


Photo 5. (A) Members of the Gastroenterology editorial team during a meeting at Digestive Diseases Week. (B) The cover of the July 2011 issue, (C) the AGA publications team with a send-off picture to Bishr upon completion of his editorial term in 2016.

In 2011, Bishr took the helm of *Gastroenterology* as its Editor-in-Chief (EIC), bringing with him an esteemed team of world-renowned experts to serve as Associate and Special Section Editors (Photo 5A). His leadership of the *Journal* was extraordinary, and his Board of Editors respected his drive and ambition to take *Gastroenterology* to new heights. Doug Corley, who is the current co-EIC and a past Associate Editor with Bishr, remarks “As the Editor-in-Chief of Gastroenterology, Bishr was, in a word, superb. How can one describe superb? Thoughtful, yet decisive. Visionary, yet pragmatic. He provided strong expert guidance forged from experience, yet while providing appropriate autonomy for others. Kind. Supportive. Inclusive. Humble. Never asking more from others than he would do himself (several times over). Bishr always focused on reaching the right decision, on each paper, every time, using group decision-making and with the highest level of respect for the authors and colleagues on the Board of Editors—all while making working together seem like a family. There is a reason Bishr has been so successful with every undertaking—these are just a few.”

During his tenure, Bishr introduced several types of novel editorial content, including the Mentoring, Education, and Training Corner, GI in Motion, and Practical Teaching Cases. He was also instrumental in helping redesign the

cover of *Gastroenterology* (Photo 5B), giving it a fresh and modern look. Bishr’s approach to the publication of scientific output was always tremendously fair and inclusive, which was notably illustrated by his initiation and leading a multisociety practice that is still employed by *Gastroenterology* and *Hepatology* of bolding the names of co-first authors in the references section of articles. He believed deeply in the interdisciplinary nature of scientific research and his time as *Gastroenterology*’s EIC reflected that value. Bishr was deliberate about accelerating the peer-review and publication processes, reducing the turnaround time from submission to decision to an all-time low, and publishing accepted papers online within days of acceptance.

Bishr’s crowning achievement while EIC of *Gastroenterology* was the meteoric rise of its impact factor (he prefers to call it impact rather than impact factor). At the start of his term in 2011, the *Journal*’s impact factor was 11.7; in his final year in 2016, it had climbed to an all-time high of 18.4. Bishr and his team never sacrificed quality or scope for the impact factor, however; they always ensured that the ultimate goal was to publish the best and most relevant science in the field.

During his 10 years on the *Gastroenterology* Board of Editors, Bishr worked closely with the AGA publications

staff, collaborating with them on various projects, streamlining processes, and implementing new ideas (Photo 5C). He was a kind and generous leader and motivated the staff to work hard and strive for high results. He served as a mentor and friend, in particular to Erin Landis, who was transitioning during that time from her role as director to vice president of publications. She often sought Bishr's advice on matters ranging far and wide, from what was best for the *Journal* to how to handle challenging situations with compassion and diplomacy. *Gastroenterology's* Managing Editor Chris Lowe comments, "Bishr's drive and commitment to the journal greatly impressed and inspired all of us who worked with him on the editorial staff. His success in advancing *Gastroenterology's* position as the top journal in the field was a testament to his vision and tireless work."

Gastroenterology was incredibly lucky to have Bishr serve as its EIC, setting the stage for future Boards of Editors. It was a natural progression then, for him to join the AGA Institute Governing Board where he could transfer his leadership of the society's flagship journal to its governance. When asked about his time with *Gastroenterology*, Bishr replied "It helped me understand why my papers are often rejected, but on a much more serious note it was an incredible honor and experience. Being mentored by Anil when I served with his team was essential, but the credit goes to our board and special section editors who became family, worked very hard, and handled every paper as if it's their own. We were supported by an outstanding Journal staff and Elsevier team who stuck and worked with us 24/7. Erin Landis was thankfully 'assigned' to me by Anil to assist with handling the papers I oversaw during my first 5 years with Gastro. She made it such a pleasure to work with the Journal and was one of the motivators for me to apply for the editorship. I was so fortunate to continue working with her then Chris Lowe as managing editors."

Rutgers University and Onward

In August 2019, Bishr began a new position at Rutgers University as senior vice chancellor for academic affairs and research for the Rutgers health-related schools that include the 2 medical schools (New Jersey Medical School and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School), in addition to the schools of dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, public health, and health professions. This virtual health campus was established when the former University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey joined Rutgers in 2013. He is very excited about this new position because it combines both the academic and research aspects that have many "biologic" connections already, and also leverage an affiliation that was forged in 2018 between Rutgers University and the Barnabas Health System that provides health care for more than 40% of New Jersey's population. Bishr believes that his involvement with Rutgers and the strategic planning that he is overseeing bodes well for his role with the AGA and working with the Governing Board, the Committees, AGA staff, the membership at large, and the other GI societies to promote digestive health at the local and national levels. The Chancellor to whom Bishr reports to, Dr Brian Strom, said:

"An international leader in GI biology and physiology, Bishr is a consummate physician-scientist who has had a highly distinguished academic, research, training and administrative career. At Rutgers, Bishr leads the education, faculty development and research missions of RBHS, serving as our chief academic and scientific officer. His role in organizing and energizing the biomedical research enterprise across our schools, centers and institutes will further our progress in becoming a nationally recognized and leading academic health center. I am so delighted to work with him."

In closing, we learned a lot as we wrote this narrative, and it made us reflect on the tremendous contributions that Bishr has made to institutions and, most importantly, to individuals who had the pleasure to work and interact with him in any capacity, including all of us. Three additional insights about Bishr came from Dr Vince Yang, Chair of Medicine at State University of New York at Stony Brook, who stated: "The thing that strikes me when I first met Bishr is his warmth and affability. He treats others always with respect and he genuinely cares about people and making things better. Bishr is also inquisitive with enormous curiosity about not only science but anything that he comes into contact with. These humanistic traits enable him to become an immensely successful scientist, teacher, mentor, and leader." Dr Nick Davidson, Chief of GI at Washington University, and incoming AGA Councilor for Research commented "I've spoken to many former trainees and junior faculty who worked with Bishr at Stanford and at Michigan. Their overwhelming consensus is that Bishr is a principled and devoted mentor, a brilliant individual who projects inexhaustible enthusiasm. Bishr has been a guiding light for many of the important decisions in my career and his insights are always genuine and enormously valuable. The AGA is in good hands."

Dr Natasha Snider, Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina, fittingly with the above, said "Bishr is a man of service, integrity and the highest standards in every regard. I was fortunate to be one of his postdoctoral mentees during the time he was the Chair of the Department of Physiology at the University of Michigan. The 5 years I spent working with Bishr were transformative for my personal and professional growth, my approach to science research, and my appreciation for the community that we are a part of. Leading by example, Bishr taught me to 'keep my eyes on the stars and my feet on the ground' and to truly value each and every individual and their talents and contributions. I am beyond grateful to have him as a friend and mentor for life, and to be able to call him for advice whenever I need it. He is an extraordinary leader and a tireless advocate for research who will take the AGA to new heights."

We asked Bishr about his upcoming AGA presidency year and he said "I am grateful for the support my family has given me; it is a humbling and huge honor to serve as AGA president. Although one year comes and goes quickly, it will be more meaningful and productive by working closely with past president Hashem El-Serag, president-elect John Inadomi, and vice president John Carethers with input and

feedback from the community at large and collaborations with our sister societies. This is more important now than any other time given the COVID-19 pandemic. AGA will continue to urgently work with and for patients, and our community of gastroenterologists, researchers, trainees and other AGA members, to overcome the disruptions created by the pandemic and ultimately be in a better place than we were before. AGA's vision remains a world free from digestive diseases." Capturing Bishr's impact is best articulated by Maya Angelou, who said, "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel," with the friendly amendment being that we also won't forget and we know what he did and will be doing as he takes on his position with AGA.

To the AGA membership and beyond, we rejoice in introducing our next AGA President, Dr M. Bishr Omary, a Renaissance man for all seasons.

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