In Memoriam: James J. Rahal Jr, MD

To the Editor—We mark the passing of James J. Rahal, Jr (14 October 1933–11 June 2011). Jim, as he was known to all his friends and colleagues, was a physician, scientist, and professor of medicine and infectious diseases. Above all, he was recognized as a consummate clinician.

Jim received his undergraduate degree from Harvard cum laude in 1955 and his medical degree from Tufts University cum laude in 1959. He completed his medicine residency training at Bellevue Hospital in New York City and his infectious diseases training at New England Medical Center Hospitals in Boston, under the tutelage of the renowned Louis Weinstein. Jim’s lifelong interest in the host-pathogen relationship began with his studies of bacterial toxins, biochemical mechanisms in septic shock, and Staphylococcus aureus toxins [1]. He led the Infectious Diseases section at the Manhattan Veterans Administration Medical Center (1969–1986), where he published extensively on topics including endocarditis (basic science and clinical trials of short and traditional course of treatment), investigations with cephalosporins, and infections with gram-negative pathogens (including meningitis) [2–5]. He never ceased to weave pathogenesis with clinical findings, using both as a platform for therapeutic intervention. His interests eventually encompassed the then newly diagnosed human immunodeficiency virus and associated opportunistic infections [6]. He served on the National Institutes of Health Data and Safety Monitoring Board for AIDS Treatment Evaluation Units, among other national committees.

Jim’s career brought him to New York Hospital Queens in 1988 where, over the next 25 years, he led the Infectious Diseases section and produced some of his most memorable research on the molecular identification and clinical impact of extended-spectrum β-lactamase–containing Klebsiella pneumoniae and multidrug-resistant Acinetobacter and Pseudomonas [7, 8]. His work on novel combination treatment regimens led to international recognition and often-quoted publications [9].

His keen intellect and clinical expertise allowed him to connect the newly described West Nile virus (WNV) epidemic in 1999 with work in the field of hepatitis C virus and to collaborate on early work on the use of interferon-α for the treatment of WNV encephalitis [10]. He created a national, multisite research protocol to examine interferon-α-2b for treatment of the WNV encephalitis and became a leading expert in the field.

Jim received extensive professional recognition and numerous awards during his long career. It was difficult to guess the breadth of his knowledge and his sagacious mind during an informal interaction. The news media often sought his expertise on antibiotic resistance, WNV infection, and other infectious diseases. In addition to being a prodigious writer and meticulous editor, he provided editorial review for numerous prestigious peer-reviewed publications.

On a personal level, Jim is remembered for his self-effacing and gracious manner. He was a gentle and considerate man who treated everyone as his peer. Jim’s avid mind and keen intellect, his curiosity and thoughtful analyses, were infectious to those fortunate to work with him. His legacy will continue in the residents and fellows he taught and the residents we continue to teach in our turn.

Note

Potential conflicts of interest. All authors: No reported conflicts. All authors have submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

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