In Memoriam: Gene H. Stollerman

To the Editor—Gene Stollerman, MD, died peacefully at his home in Hanover, New Hampshire on 1 August 2014 (Figure 1). He was 93. His contributions to US medical education, infectious diseases, rheumatic diseases and immunology, geriatrics, the compassionate care of the elderly, and palliative care will endure.

Dr Stollerman was a native of New York City and attended Jamaica High School prior to entering Dartmouth College in 1937. He received his medical education at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons where he was introduced to some of the greatest figures in contemporary medicine. After residency at Mt Sinai Hospital, he was inducted into the Army Medical Corps. Upon his discharge in 1947, he served as chief medical resident at Mt Sinai and subsequently was offered a research fellowship at New York University (NYU) College of Medicine under the mentorship of Dr Colin MacLeod, the co-discoverer of DNA.

His research training at NYU set the stage for a life-long passion to understand the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of streptococcal infections, acute rheumatic fever, and rheumatic heart disease, which were rampant during and after WWII. Based on Stollerman’s stellar early accomplishments in medicine and research, MacLeod recommended him for the position of Medical Director of Irvington House in New York City, one of several prominent medical facilities in the country dedicated to caring for children with rheumatic heart disease. While at Irvington House, he proved for the first time that monthly injections of a new long-acting formulation of penicillin, benzathine penicillin G, could prevent recurrences of rheumatic fever in children [1] and thus ameliorate the long-term consequences of rheumatic heart disease. This so-called secondary prevention strategy remains the most effective method for controlling rheumatic heart disease around the world.

Dr Stollerman left New York in 1955 to assume a faculty position at Northwestern University Medical School, where he spent the next 10 years building a clinical and basic research program aimed at controlling and preventing streptococcal infections in children and adults. He established himself as an international figure in medicine and research. As an advisor to the Naval Medical Research Unit at the Great Lakes Naval Station, he advocated for mass penicillin prevention of streptococcal infections in new recruits, which halted the epidemics of rheumatic fever. The practice was later extended to all military recruits and is still in use today.

Dr Stollerman seized an opportunity to more broadly impact medical education, practice, and research by assuming the position of Chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of Tennessee in Memphis in 1964. He recruited some of the best researchers, clinicians, and educators to head the new subspecialty divisions, thereby enhancing the stature of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center as one of the premier state medical schools in the southeast region. He influenced the careers of thousands of medical students and medical residents during his 17-year tenure as chair. He also continued his intense interest in the development of vaccines designed to prevent streptococcal infections and rheumatic fever [2].

Stollerman continued to serve as a member of the Commission on Streptococcal and Staphylococcal Diseases of the US Armed Forces Epidemiological Board. He also later served on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), which provides expert guidance on the use of childhood and adult vaccines. While attending a meeting of the ACIP at the CDC in 1969, he was invited to participate in a blue-ribbon panel convened by the CDC to advise on the fate of the long-running syphilis experiment on the natural history of untreated advanced syphilis in hundreds of black men in a town near Tuskegee, Alabama. Dr Stollerman had no real knowledge of the study prior to his participation on the advisory panel. He later wrote in his memoir, “I came to the meeting astounded that the CDC had...”

Figure 1. Gene H. Stollerman, MD. Photo by Bachrach, Boston, Massachusetts. Reprinted with permission.
tolerated continuing the study so long” [3]. Of the 6 members of the panel, Stollerman was the only one who recommended discontinuing the study and treating each patient on an individual basis [4]. He was a strong advocate for an ethical approach to research that placed informed consent, individual choice, and options for treatment above medical science.

After Dr Stollerman’s successful tenure at the University of Tennessee, in 1981 he accepted a position in the General Medicine Division of Boston University School of Medicine, where he continued to teach and contribute to the medical literature. As he aged, he become more intensely interested in the field of geriatrics and compassionate care of the elderly. He was soon named the chief of the division and became the editor of the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society. Prior to his eventual “retirement,” Dr Stollerman was selected by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as one of 12 Distinguished Physicians who served as national resources for the VA healthcare system. In 1989, he was appointed Associate Chief of Staff for Geriatrics at the Bedford VA Medical Center and successfully competed for a large geriatrics research and education program project grant from the VA. In 1992, Dr Stollerman retired to Hanover, where he returned full circle to his days at Dartmouth.

Dr Stollerman was the recipient of a wealth of honors and awards. He was a member of the Association of American Physicians, a Master of the American College of Physicians and a member of its Board of Regents, President of the Central Society for Clinical Research, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. However, most important to him were the relationships he formed with his mentors and with the students he, in turn, mentored. His hands-on, humanistic approach to medical care extended to every aspect of his professional work and it spilled over into his personal relationships with colleagues of all ages. He also made the time to take meticulous and tender care of his family and close friends. At the age of 91, he wrote with great clarity his memoir, Medicine, A Love Story: The 20th Century Odyssey of an American Professor of Medicine [3]. But the best way to learn about him is to talk to the people whose lives he touched and who carry his memories in a rich legacy for future generations.

Dr Stollerman’s unfinished work aimed at vaccine prevention of streptococcal infections and acute rheumatic fever now continues at the University of Tennessee, conducted by his students and their students. Countless physicians and scientists have benefited from his teaching and wise counsel, which was recognized by the Infectious Diseases Society of America when, in 2004, they presented to him their coveted “Mentor Award.” Even more have learned what he already knew about the ethical and compassionate medical treatment of all individuals, independent of race, socioeconomic status, or literacy. American medicine has lost a giant.

Note

Potential conflict of interest. Both authors: No reported conflicts.

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