In Memoriam: Morton N. Swartz

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Morton N. Swartz, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, former chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), past president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), and recipient of the IDSA Bristol Award for Lifetime Achievement, passed away on 9 September 2013 from complications of kidney failure. Mort Swartz was a truly remarkable man; a unique figure in medicine, science, and infectious diseases; and a legendary figure at the MGH and Harvard Medical School.

Mort was born in Dorchester in 1923 and educated in the public schools of Brookline, Massachusetts. In 1941, at the age of 18 years, he entered the Navy through an accelerated World War II-associated program that allowed him to complete his undergraduate degree at Harvard College in just 2 years, serve as a hospital corpsman in the Navy, and return to enter Harvard Medical School in 1944 as an ensign. He received his doctor of medicine degree 3 years later. After medical school, Mort began working at the MGH in 1947 as an intern. His 3 years of residency in medicine were followed by a research fellowship in cellular metabolism. However, this research training was disrupted in 1951, when Mort was again called into military service, this time as a first lieutenant and medical officer in a field artillery group during the Korean War. Mort returned to the MGH in 1953 and served for 1 year as chief resident before going to Johns Hopkins University for 2 years of additional research training in biochemistry.

The chairman of medicine at the MGH in the 1950s was Dr Walter Bauer, a man whom Mort revered. Dr Bauer asked Mort to return from Hopkins and start a new division in the Department of Medicine at the MGH, in the new specialty of infectious diseases. Mort accepted the invitation and returned in 1956. Initially Mort was the only faculty member in the division, and he personally delivered outstanding infectious diseases care on all of the adult and pediatric services of the hospital, while establishing
his own research program. Mort’s mentor in his new specialty was Dr Louis Weinstein, another giant in our field and a man Mort often credited as his own mentor in infectious diseases. Mort was subsequently joined by other faculty members in the growing division. Mort deepened his research knowledge and training with 2 sabbaticals, in 1960–1961 and 1969–1970, working in the laboratory of Nobel laureate Arthur Kornberg at Stanford, another major mentor in Mort’s life.

Mort served as the chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at the MGH for 34 years, from 1956 to 1990, and built the division into an internationally recognized clinical and research center of excellence. Mort, indeed, may be called one of the fathers of infectious diseases as a discipline, not just at the MGH but across the United States. But Mort never took the certifying examination in infectious diseases that everyone now takes. He trained before infectious diseases was recognized as a specialty, and he largely wrote the subsequent certifying examination. During his 34 years as chief, thousands of individuals had the exceptional privilege of working with and learning from Mort. Many of the people he trained went on to set up infectious diseases divisions at other institutions and have subsequently assumed additional leadership positions around the country and, indeed, around the world.

Over his career in infectious diseases, Mort received virtually all of the awards and honors one can imagine. He was elected to membership in the American Society for Clinical Investigation, the Association of American Physicians, and the Institute of Medicine. He received the Bristol Award for Lifetime Achievement in Infectious Diseases from the IDSA and served as the president of that society in the 1980s. He received the Distinguished Teacher Award and was elected to Mastership in the American College of Physicians. He also received the MGH Trustees Medal in 2011, during the hospital’s bicentennial.

In 1990, Mort stepped down as chief of infectious diseases and became the James Jackson Firm Chief in the Department of Medicine, a position in which each day he taught clinical medicine, pathophysiology, and perhaps, most importantly, humanism to hundreds of medical residents and medical students at the bedside. Many of those individuals have pointed to Mort as the single most important figure in their career development as a physician. Fittingly, the residency program at the MGH established the Morton N. Swartz Humanism Award, given annually in his honor.

In 2002, Mort stepped down as the James Jackson Firm Chief but continued to be active in the department, attending medical grand rounds and often asking the most insightful and undoubtedly the most challenging questions at the end of the talk. Mort’s questions not only demonstrated his amazingly deep understanding of the field, but they also pushed the bounds of current knowledge with great insight and foresight.

Many of us who came under Mort’s influence can recall our first meeting, as students or fellows or junior faculty. Mort, as an attending physician (called a “visit” in those days) or while discussing cases on rounds, had a striking, characteristically gentle, and thorough approach to patients. His amazing mastery of clinical skills, medicine, and science and his remarkable patience and ability to explain, engage, and teach were truly captivating. For many of us, it was Mort who drew us to internal medicine and infectious diseases by his example as the consummate physician, a role model to which we would aspire but could never match.

Mort was inspirational. He had an intuitive ability to take the same information everybody else had and put it together in a way that would solve a problem that had eluded others. One of the particularly fun things about training with Mort is that not only could he tell you what the answer was, but he could explain what it was about the information that led him to that conclusion, teaching clinical reasoning. He also had a wonderful ability to help you think through a puzzle, guiding and probing you with subtle questions along the way until you actually thought that you had solved the puzzle, only to realize later that he had held your hand and gently steered you to the center of the maze. Mort was a true teacher in every sense. He stuck by his trainees, cared for them, and shaped them. And he was so proud of their accomplishments. He was driven not by ambition but by the pursuit of excellence.

Mort was so much more than extraordinarily smart, more than brilliant. His knowledge, in fact, was encyclopedic and far-reaching, and not just in medicine and science. Indeed, Mort knew more about physics, philosophy, and even sports—particularly his beloved Boston Celtics—than anyone else we have met. In addition to his prodigious intellect, he was amazingly humble, with a great wry sense of humor. Mort loved a good joke.

Mort, however, wasn’t perfect. He had an absolutely terrible sense of direction—something many of us experienced firsthand. As infectious diseases division chief, Mort started a weekly intercity rounds that originally alternated between the MGH, where Mort would be the discussant, and Tufts University, where Louis Weinstein would be the discussant. Traveling to Tufts from the MGH is neither far nor, in ordinary circumstances, difficult, and Mort would kindly offer us a ride over, an offer that was eagerly accepted at least the first few times, since one always learned from being with Mort. Getting directly to Tufts was, however, another matter altogether. One of us (S. B. C.) recalls an extended trip that somehow found us heading west on the Massachusetts Turnpike, moving farther and farther from Tufts and requiring some gentle guidance back to the conference. Mort could drive us into the field of infectious diseases, he could drive us all to make the right diagnosis, but he couldn’t drive to Tufts. All of us soon realized that it was better to drive with Mort than to be driven by him.
Those who knew, learned from, worked with, and loved Mort shared the incredible privilege of being in the presence of a true giant. That giant but gentle voice is now silent, but Mort will never be forgotten. He helped shape and define multiple generations of physicians, and he is part of each of us. We are grateful for that precious time with him. Mort, we thank you for being with us every step of the way. We are better doctors, better teachers, better colleagues, and better people because you taught us and because you enriched our lives. May you rest in peace.