In Memoriam

Jeffrey Michael Isner
1947 – 2001

In a year that has brought many changes in perspective for all of us, it came as a further shock to learn of the sudden death of Dr. Jeffrey Isner, at home on 31 October. Dr. Isner was a physician, an educator, a scientist, and a friend. He was, in particular, a pioneer in the field of cardiovascular gene therapy and was a major force in bridging the sometimes disparate worlds of vascular biology and clinical medicine.

Dr. Isner was born in Uhrichsville, Ohio, where he spent his childhood years before moving to Canton, Ohio, as a freshman in high school. He attended college at the University of Maryland (graduating Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude) and medical school at Tufts University in Boston. He did an internship in internal medicine at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Boston, and a residency in internal medicine and a fellowship in cardiology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He worked for two years in the Pathology Branch of The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, then returned to Tufts, where he rapidly rose to full Professor of Medicine and Pathology. In 1988, he moved from New England Medical Center to St. Elizabeth’s Medical Center to be Chief of Cardiovascular Research, and, subsequently, Director of the Human Gene Therapy Laboratory.

Those are the facts and the record of achievement. Behind all of those accomplishments was a complex and caring individual who transcended his fast-track rise through academic cardiology. Jeff’s parents were German immigrants who fled Nazi Germany and came to the United States in 1937. He grew up with one sister in a very nurturing household, where German was never spoken. His interest in cardiovascular disease began early, and he had the opportunity in high school to observe and work with Grace Hofsteter (Mason Sones’s 1st cardiology fellow at the Cleveland Clinic). Jeff enjoyed sports, although his parents were not enormously supportive of his sports endeavors. He did become a sports writer in college and was associate sports editor of the school newspaper at the University of Maryland.

At Maryland, Jeff majored in zoology. His undergraduate circle of friends included some very creative individuals, including Corey Blechman (who won an Emmy for Free Willy) and Larry David (the co-developer, co-producer, and chief writer for “Seinfeld”). Jeff actually had a walk-on role in one of the “Seinfeld” episodes.

In medical school at Tufts, Jeff continued to actively pursue his interests in internal medicine and cardiology, and had the opportunity (by means of his earlier contact with Dr. Hofsteter) to work with Mason Sones at Cleveland Clinic during what might be called the dawn of coronary revascularization, in the late 1960s. On his return to Boston from NHLBI in 1979, Jeff rapidly became involved in balloon angioplasty, and shortly thereafter in laser angioplasty, a field in which he did some of the formative work on laser-tissue interactions. He later extended his interests into the field of peripheral vascular disease as well.

Jeff’s subsequent move into molecular biology and gene therapy was therefore built on a sound foundation of biology, pathology, and clinical investigation. His swift rise to the forefront of the field came as no surprise to those of us who had worked with Jeff and seen his level of intelligence, intensity, and focus. Despite his considerable achievements, Jeff was never hesitant to share credit with his collaborators and co-workers; in fact, he went out of his way to make sure that all deserving parties were acknowledged whenever he presented his work.
In 1985, at the age of 37, Jeff married Linda Hajjar and together they had 3 children, Josh, Jessica, and Matthew (currently ages 15, 14, and 8, respectively). Weekends and evenings were reserved for family, despite his heroic academic schedule. He was an avid skier and golfer. He enjoyed sailing. But when push came to shove, family was still the priority.

In 1998, in an interview with Dr. William Roberts, Jeff noted, “... the thing that really motivated me more than anything else is a sense that I don’t want to feel that I was just kind of passing through during this lifetime. I do not want to be just one more person that came and left. I always wanted to do something that could make a little difference.”

In truth, Jeff’s life and work have made a big difference for so many of us. Jeff successfully combined the worlds of molecular biology, clinical research, and invasive/therapeutic cardiology in ways that will be further explored and developed over the next two or three decades.

I can’t help but think that this exploration and development would have been so much more complete and insightful with him as an active participant. It’s a truism that we stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us; but sometimes those doing the standing are giants in their own right.

Jeff, we’ll miss you. You opened our eyes to the new and exciting world at the interface between basic science and clinical application.

You did make a difference.

James J. Ferguson III, MD,
Department of Adult Cardiology,
St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital; and
Department of Cardiology Research,
Texas Heart Institute,
Houston

References