MEMORIAL

RALPH O. WALLERSTEIN, M.D.
1922–2009

Ralph O. Wallerstein was a truly remarkable physician, who throughout his career maintained a busy private practice as a hematologist and internist, was a renowned teacher, and also possessed extraordinary leadership skills that led him to become successively President of the American Society of Hematology, Chairman of the
American Board of Internal Medicine, and President of the American College of Physicians.

Ralph was born in Germany in 1922, and moved with his family to San Francisco in 1938. His father was a physician and started a practice in the city. After graduating from high school, Ralph entered the University of California at Berkeley. Under an accelerated program in place during World War II, Ralph graduated from UC Berkeley in 1943, and from U.C. San Francisco School of Medicine in 1945. He interned at the San Francisco General Hospital and then spent two years in the United States Army Medical Corps, stationed in Japan. After completing his military service obligations, he moved to Boston, where he was a resident on the Harvard service for a few months, and then became a fellow in the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory under Doctor William B. Castle. The Thorndike was then one of the best sites for training young physicians, and Ralph’s experience there certainly influenced the rest of his career. After two years in Boston, he returned to San Francisco, where he joined his father in clinical practice. He specialized in Internal Medicine and Hematology. He was Chief of Hematology at the San Francisco General Hospital, and hematologist to the Children’s Hospital, where he became Chief of Staff from 1968–72. For many years he was a consultant in Hematology to the Letterman Army Hospital and the Veteran’s Administration Hospital.

In addition to his private practice, Ralph joined the faculty of the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. He was an excellent teacher, and had a particular interest in morphology. In the oral history he recorded in 1990 for the American Society of Hematology, he speculated that his interest in art, especially in colors, made examining blood cells attractive to him, and this led him into Hematology. For whatever reasons, he carefully examined the blood and bone marrow preparations from each of his patients, and for many years held regular sessions at the San Francisco General Hospital to teach blood and bone marrow cell morphology to students and residents. He was appointed Clinical Professor in Medicine and Laboratory Medicine in 1969.

In those days, in addition to his practice and teaching, he was involved in clinical research. He carried out one of the early studies implicating the antibiotic, chloramphenicol, as a cause of aplastic anemia, and was one of the first to detect abnormal red cell precursors - vacuolated erythroblasts - in the bone marrow of patients with chloramphenicol-induced aplastic anemia.

The growth of specialization in internal medicine that occurred in the years after World War II led to interest in establishing new spe-
cialties, with important ancillary features, such as specialty societies and board certification. Hematology was one of these “new” specialties, and in 1958, the American Society of Hematology was founded. Ralph joined shortly after, and was an active, enthusiastic member. His participation was such that he was elected President for 1978–1979.

Further, in the 1970’s the American Board of Internal Medicine began to prepare for certification of physicians with special competence in Hematology, and Ralph was asked to participate in this developing program. He was appointed to the Board, and served as Chairman of the Subspecialty Committee on Hematology that was responsible for preparing the certifying examinations. He continued to serve on the Board and was elected Chairman for 1982 to 1983.

Ralph also became active in the American College of Physicians in the 1970’s, serving first as Governor of his district from 1977 to 1981, then as a member of the Board of Regents, and finally as President from 1988 to 1989.

In addition to the above, Ralph has been recognized with many honors, including election to the Institute of Medicine, and Master of the American College of Physicians. Upon retirement he was appointed Emeritus Professor at the University of California San Francisco. He was named Physician of the Year at Children’s Hospital, Alumnus of the Year at UCSF, and recipient of the Charlotte Baer Award for Outstanding Teaching.

I first met Ralph in the mid-1960’s, when we were attending separate but simultaneous scientific meetings in Carmel, California. I was introduced to him by our mutual friend, Robert Schilling, of the University of Wisconsin, whom I respected very much as an academic hematologist. Bob later told me what a remarkable man Ralph was, fulfilling all the academic requirements of the time while maintaining a busy private practice in both Hematology and Internal Medicine. I subsequently came to know Ralph better on our own turf, and in the mid-1970’s, he invited me to serve on the Subspecialty Committee on Hematology to prepare questions for the certifying examinations then being administered. Ralph was Chairman of the Committee, and working with him was a great pleasure. His knowledge of Hematology was both broad and deep, and was also soundly practical—an ideal combination for his role on that Committee. I promptly learned that his general knowledge extended well beyond Medicine and Hematology. Of particular use to the Committee was his encyclopedic knowledge of food and wine. We developed discriminating examinations, and we dined well.

I next worked with Ralph in the 1980’s on the Residency Review
Committee for Internal Medicine, that had responsibility for reviewing all residencies in General Internal Medicine and fellowships in the medical subspecialties. This was an important and busy committee, and I was again impressed with Ralph’s medical knowledge, and, in addition, his organizational skills and commitment to quality.

Spouses often attended our Residency Review Committee meetings, which were held in pleasant, interesting places, and we were delighted to meet Ralph’s wife, Betty. Betty often attended and was soon recognized as equally effective, better organized, and even more charming than her husband. The Wallersteins were great companions, and the Climatological meetings provided repeated opportunities to enjoy their company.

Ralph died at his vacation home on June 1, 2009 after a long illness. His son, Doctor Ralph O. Wallerstein, Jr., predeceased him in 1996. He is survived by his wife, Betty, son Richard, daughter Ann, seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

William J. Williams