Emil Frei III: A Personal Remembrance

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Emil “Tom” Frei III passed away on April 30, 2013. There have been a number of obituaries and testimonials already written, but this is a personal remembrance for those of us who were privileged to be under his tutelage at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) during the formative years of combination chemotherapy. Tom Frei is considered a pioneer in the field of medical oncology by virtue of his conceptual leadership in the development of new agents and their use in combination where appropriate. His introduction of the first successful cooperative chemotherapy group, Acute Leukemia Group B, which became Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB), served to highlight new agents in the treatment of acute leukemia. He served as chairman of CALGB on two separate occasions. He was a foundation editor of the first textbook in medical oncology along with Dr. James Holland, a longtime friend and colleague. He also was a key individual in the effort to create an accredited Board of Medical Oncology under the American Board of Internal Medicine (American Board of Internal Medicine) in 1972. At the time, there was uncertainty--and in some quarters opposition--as to whether the new field would be accepted as an appropriate subspecialty of internal medicine. All of the above plus leadership roles in the American Association for Cancer Research and the American Society of Clinical Oncology Society justifies the term “pioneer” in the nascent field of medical oncology.

Tom was a constant source of enthusiasm and ideas about chemotherapy and its novel application in dose and in combination. His close collaboration with Dr. Emil “Jay” Frei-

reich developed a successful combination chemotherapy regimen for childhood lymphoblastic leukemia at the NCI. He was very supportive of new ideas in chemotherapy, including the encouragement of the seminal efforts of Dr. Vincent DeVita and associates to develop the nitrogen mustard, vincristine, procarbazine, and prednisone (MOPP) regimen for Hodgkin’s lymphoma. After his departure to MD Anderson in 1965, there remained at NCI the determination and effort to continue the application of combined chemotherapy in the appropriate diseases. The success of the MOPP regimen at effecting a cure of the disease, which was previously considered to be fatal, led to similar successful efforts in large cell non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and, by extension, to metastatic and adjuvant therapy of breast cancer.

Tom Frei’s career continued in two further segments where his influence contributed to the growth of the field (MD Anderson, 1965-1972, then at Dana-Farber, 1972

until his retirement in 1996). His position as Physician-in-Chief of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute saw a growth of faculty, research programs, and evolution of the Institute to international standing in the field.

Those of us who trained under him or worked with him remember his positive thinking and commitment to progress in our field. He used to say “we are here to move the field,” and indeed his words were turned into reality in time as witnessed by those of us who were fortunate enough to have known him. A large number of fellows grew and matured in the field having known or having been exposed to Tom’s philosophy; they are now

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Back row: George P. Canellos, Bob Mayer, Emil Frei III.
Front row: Sam Hellman, Vincent T. DeVita

themselves leaders in the field. That was always a source of satisfaction for him. Tom leaves a field that has matured with his inspiration and continues to grow in scientific scope and in the application of the new science to cancer therapeutics--his greatest interest.