Profiles in Cardiology

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Richard Starr Ross

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Richard Starr Ross (Fig. 1) was born in Richmond, Indiana, in 1924. He received his M.D. degree cum laude from Harvard Medical School in June 1947 and served his medical internship and residency on the Osler Medical Service at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. He obtained further training as a Research Fellow in physiology at Harvard Medical School and returned to Johns Hopkins in 1953 where he directed the Cardiovascular Division of the Department of Medicine from 1961 to 1975. From that Division came many of the current leaders in cardiovascular medicine throughout the world. These include, in the USA, Gottlieb C. Freisinger, J. Michael Criley, J. O'Neal Humphries, Bertram Pitt, Myron Weisfeldt, Bernadine Healy, Bruce Fye; in Australia, Aubrey Pitt, Lew Bernstein, David Kelly; in Germany, Paul Lichtlen; in Japan Yasuro Sugishita, and many others. I had the great good fortune to train and work as a faculty member in this division so that I got to know Dr. Ross up close and personal.

Dr. Ross's scientific contributions are many, but he is particularly proud of his role in the development of a method for measuring myocardial blood flow with radioactive xenon injected selectively into the coronary arteries.¹ This method was used to study the effects of myocardial ischemia on myocardial blood flow and the action of antiangina agents such as nitroglycerin. Dr. Ross was instrumental in organizing one of the earliest multicenter randomized trials to evaluate the use of coronary bypass surgery in the emergency management of unstable angina.²

O'Neal Humphries writes that "I well remember his preparation for a major lecture or research site visit. Make an outline, prepare the presentation, rehearse the presentation, rewrite the plan and presentation, rehearse again, rewrite again, again—and again—and again, until it is right. He taught us all not to use slides that could not be read at the back of the room by someone with 20/40 vision" (J. O. Humphries, personal communication).

Michael Criley wrote the following about Dr. Ross:

If restricted to the use of one descriptive term to characterize Richard Ross it would be mentor. The dictionary defines a mentor as "wise and trusted counselor." These qualities have been evident in over four decades of memorable encounters that began when I was a medical student interviewing for a position on the house staff and continue to this day when we exchange e-mail over 3,000 miles of cyberspace. As a physician, he cares *about* in addition to caring *for* his patients, and the same can be said for his devotion to this profession and his trainees. As an intern, resident, fellow, and member of his cardiology faculty, I benefited greatly from his wisdom and counsel. He was then and is now eminently approachable. His thoughtful and thorough evaluations of my manuscripts and scientific presentations were humbling at the time, but in every instance clarified, focused, and greatly improved the final product. He was able to impart many of his qualities to a legion of trainees. I will be the first to admit that his consistently high standards are difficult to emulate and impossible to exceed (J. M. Criley, personal communication).

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I would add to Criley's comments: Those of us who worked with him were always humbled by the way he could identify the crucial aspects of our research and simplify the presentations of our data so that everyone interested in the subject could fully understand it. He was a master at this.

As a cardiovascular clinician, Dr. Ross had no peer. He had the unique ability to analyze complex data obtained from patients and diagnostic studies and arrive at a sensible solution to the patient's problems.

FIG. 1 Richard Starr Ross, M.D.

When asked about what he was most proud of as Chief of the Cardiovascular Division at Johns Hopkins he responded, "I love seeing and hearing about my former fellows' and associates' accomplishments. You have to be able to get your kicks out of what your students do. Because that's all there is." (Interview with W. B. Fye, June 11, 1993, Baltimore, Md.)

Dr. Ross was active in the American Heart Association, serving as Chairman of the Scientific Sessions Program Committee, the Publications Committee, and as President of the Association 1973–1974. He was a recipient of the Gold Heart Award in 1976 and delivered the Conner Lecture at the American Heart Association in 1979. In 1982, the Heart Association honored Dr. Ross by presenting him with the James B. Herrick Award.

In 1975, Dr. Ross left the Cardiovascular Division and became Dean of the Medical Faculty and Vice President for Medicine. As Dean, he considered his primary responsibility to be the maintenance of quality of medical education, research, and patient care in a large private medical school and hospital, that is, Johns Hopkins. In that position, he expressed concern about the shrinking pool of medical investigators, a trend that he believed would have a profound undesirable consequence on the practice of medicine in the future. Obviously Dr. Ross had vision. Throughout his tenure as Dean and Vice President he continued to see a need to encourage young physicians to enter careers in research and teaching so that the progress of biomedical research that had characterized the last 40 years would continue. Through Dr. Ross's efforts, a fund was established to support young investigators during their early years at Johns Hopkins. These internal grants provide start-up funds that will enable a new generation of Hopkins faculty to compete successfully for outside funds such as NIH, American Heart, and so forth. Dr. Ross thought this program was an important investment in the academic leadership of tomorrow.

Prior to his retirement as Dean and Vice President, Johns Hopkins honored him again, dedicating a \$98 million research building as the Ross Research Building.

Dr. Ross retired from Johns Hopkins as Vice President for Medicine and Dean of the Medical Faculty in 1990. Since that time he and his wife Elizabeth (Boo) have been enjoying their retirement in Baltimore and Florida.

References

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