

MEMORIAL

Herbert C. Flessa, M.D.

1926-2011

Herb Flessa was a member of the Literary Club of Cincinnati for seventeen years from 1991 until 2008 when illness finally claimed his ability to join us. A Cincinnati through and through, he was born March 26, 1926 and claimed the “West Side” as his roots. After graduation from Western Hills High School in 1944, he was drafted into the Navy and assigned to the Heavy Cruiser USS Pensacola CA-24 which participated in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 and at Iwo Jima in February of 1945. On February 17, 1945, while providing close-in ground support for the Marines, she was hit several times by Japanese coastal guns, but quickly returned to the battle.

After the war, Herb returned home and obtained his undergraduate degree from the University of Cincinnati, and then graduated from the College of Medicine in 1952. An internship and year of residency were followed by seven years in private practice. Wishing to expand his knowledge and take advantage of his many talents, he returned to UC in 1961 to complete another year of residency and two years of a Hematology fellowship. Herb was very fortunate to study under the guidance of two of the most important Hematologists of that time – our former member Dr. Richard Vilter and Dr. Helen Glueck, whose husband Rabbi Nelson Glueck was a member as well.

In 1964, he began his distinguished academic career with his appointment as Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine at UC. Besides his rigorous teaching and patient care schedule, he found time to publish over 30 scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals, and, on a lighter note, one of his papers “Traveling with Musicians: Notes of a Tour Physician” was published in **Travel Medicine International** 1:12:1993. The Club members were entertained with a much expanded version of that paper on May 20, 1996 entitled “Big Blue” which regaled the members with his experiences as Tour Physician with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on its 1990 tour of Japan. Turns out “Big Blue” was the nick-name for his wife Jeannine’s favorite travel bag. Herb lovingly described its size as “roughly a small garage with a handle and wheels”. Herb’s writing gives us a sparkling rendition of what an experience that must have been. Imagine hearing the 112 members of the CSO with conductors Jesus Lopez-Cobos, Erich Kunzel, and Keith Lockhart playing their hearts out almost every other night! I encourage you to read that paper and I’ve provided copies in the foyer.

Herb’s other eight papers are a potpourri of topics – education, farming, family interaction, sports, Hematology, epidemics, and food. Each was obviously written with enthusiasm and loving care.

But let’s turn to the man himself. His obituary described him as a “kindhearted man with a beautiful singing voice and a good sense of humor”. Those of us who knew him would certainly agree but go beyond by pointing out his sincere compassion for his patients and his gentle encouragement to those who were dying in front of him. A Hematologist of his era sometimes had few tools to treat an adult or child with acute

leukemia. I can't imagine the heart ache that he frequently felt. Herb was a "Doctor's Doctor" as well as a role model and mentor to several generations of medical students and residents. John Steiner recounted how much Herb would go out of his way to help not only on difficult cases but on more mundane things like finding a place to live for a new arrival. Bob Dorsey and Jack Liebold both recalled him as a very competitive tennis player whose whoops celebrating a great shot could be heard 4 courts away. In 2004 Herb received the Daniel Drake Medal, the highest honor conferred by the College of Medicine in recognition of his distinguished career as a clinician and teacher, but his biggest contribution to this world is known to too few. In 1968 Dr. Joe Lindner, Chief of General Hospital, Dr. Herb Flessa, and Dr. Paul Lewis together developed and pushed forward, despite some almost overwhelming objections of other faculty, the concept and the implementation of what is now known as Emergency Medicine. The first Emergency Medicine residency in the United States was founded in Cincinnati in 1970 and, in the last 40 years, has spread around the world saving millions of lives each year. I am quite confident in saying that everyone in this room either personally or in his family has benefitted from what Herb has done – incredible. We'll miss him.

Committee:

Jack McDonough, M.D.

Robert Dorsey

John Steiner, M.D.

Presented to the Literary Club of Cincinnati
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