In Memoriam: Robert J. Joynt, MD, PhD (1925-2012)

On his way to neurology grand rounds, Robert (Bob) Joynt, MD, PhD, died suddenly on April 13, 2012, at the age of 86 years in Rochester, New York. He is survived by his wife, Margaret; their 6 children Robert, Patricia, Mary, Anne, Thomas, and Kathleen and their spouses; and 9 grandchildren.

Joynt was chief editor of the Archives of Neurology (1982-1997); a trexcta president of the American Academy of Neurology (1977-1979), American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (1979), and the American Neurological Association (1987-1988); and dean of the School of Medicine and Dentistry and the first vice president and vice provost of the University of Rochester (UR) Medical Center (1985-1994). He was also elected a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences (1989) and was honored by the UR as a Distinguished University Professor (1997) and the installation of the Robert J. Joynt Professorship in Experimental Therapeutics in Neurology (2011). The title of Distinguished University Professor is conferred only to a handful of individuals who have made substantial and varied contributions to their own scholarly field and to the university during the course of many years.

Joynt was born the youngest of 4 children in Le Mars, Iowa. His father was a dentist and an active Democrat in an overwhelmingly Republican area. After high school, Joynt served as a staff sergeant and radio operator in the US Army Signal Corps, tracking troop movements in India (1946). He graduated from Westmar College (1949) and went on to receive his medical degree from the University of Iowa (1952), where he was first in his class. He interned at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal (1952-1953) and was a Fulbright Scholar at Cambridge University (1953-1954), where he developed an interest in hypothalamic neurophysiology before returning to the University of Iowa to complete a neurology residency (1957). In 1953, Joynt married the extraordinary Margaret McGivern, who would become a gifted and devoted family attorney and judge. This remarkable duo parented 6 children, who have also enjoyed successful careers and remarkable achievements.

Joynt’s nascent interests in neurology and research at the University of Iowa were inspired by his teachers Adolph Sahs, a distinguished neurologist, and Arthur Benton, an innovative neuropsychologist. Both Sahs and Benton recognized Joynt’s skills, encouraged his graduate work on hypothalamic water regulation and the osmoreceptor, and served as research mentors and co-authors of early scholarly publications (eg, Neurology. 1956;6:791-803 and Arch Neurol. 1960;3:205-221). He received his PhD in anatomy in 1963 from the University of Iowa.

Word began to spread through academic neurology circles about the talented rookie who had far-ranging expertise from electroencephalography to meningitis and interests from osmoreceptors to public policy. George Engel, the father of the biopsychosocial model of medicine and chair of the neurology search committee at UR, traveled to Iowa to recruit Joynt. Joynt agreed to move to Rochester and succeeded the division head Paul Garvey to become the first chair of the newly established Department of Neurology.

When Joynt arrived at the UR in 1966, the core faculty comprised Richard Satran, David Goldblatt, and David Marsh. Joynt deployed his personal magic and within the next 5 years retained or recruited Robert (Berch) Griggs (neuromuscular), Gerald Honch and Joshua Hollandier (general neurology), Richard Moxley (neuromuscular), Gary Myers (child neurology), and Ira Shoulson (movement disorders). Soon thereafter, Robert Hamill, Robert Holloway, Ralph Jozefowicz, Karl Kieburzt, Roger Kurlan, Richard Rudick, and Charles Thornton joined the ranks of his expanding family of academic neurologists. Inspired by Joynt’s growing emphasis on education, training, and treatment, the faculty worked against the embedded neurology mantra of diagnosis and adios. They shared a common interest and developed expertise focused on treatment and the experimental therapeutics of neurologic disorders.

By 1985, the UR Department of Neurology had achieved a critical mass of faculty to advance neurologic therapeutics. Joynt was tapped to head the growing UR Medical Center, and Griggs subsequently became chair of the department that would soon lead the country in National Institutes of Health–sponsored neurologic research. Joynt oversaw the Medical Center when its Strong Memorial Hospital and School of Medicine were experiencing unparalleled growth in the setting of increased specialization, curricular consolidation, and technological advances. He also appreciated the emerging contributions of molecular biology and genetics, and the application to experimental therapeutics. By 1994, Joynt had ensured the sustained growth of the UR as a preeminent academic medical center.

Joynt’s career spanned several generations of academic neurology. After concluding his academic leader-
ship of the UR Medical Center, he busied himself in scholarship and public service, joining his contemporaries (eg, Arthur Asbury, Bob Fishman, Sid Gilman, Richard Johnson, Joe Martin, Guy McKhann, Roger Rosenberg, and Lewis [Bud] Rowland) in advancing neurology as a scientific, clinical, and therapeutic force in modern medicine. Other noteworthy contributions included work as founding editor of Seminars of Neurology and editor of Baker and Joynt's Clinical Neurology. He was also co-editor of the book Presidential Disability, a study that deals with the problems of US presidential succession in the event of disability. He was also an active member of the Board of Regents of the National Library of Medicine and an influential teacher of students and house staff. He was also the section editor of “Changes, People, Comments” for Neurology. He was holding his final submission to this section when he collapsed on April 13.

Peripheral vascular disease gradually took a toll, but his personality, intellect, liveliness, and spirit remained intact as Joynt continued actively to write, teach, and oversee students and house staff caring for patients. He remained a gifted diagnostician, caring clinician, pithy linguist, lucid communicator, voracious reader, skilled sailor, master raconteur, and far-ranging intellectual.

Joynt's remarkable life was distinguished by generativity that was empowered by humility and wit. Coined by the psychologist Erik Erikson, generativity is an apt description of the powerful trait that Joynt cultivated and naturally shared throughout his life. His nature was to nurture. He possessed a deep concern for guiding the next generation; giving back as he received; and moving beyond self and family to the concern and care of patients, students, colleagues, friends, community, and humanity. He was sympathetic to the needy and embraced the mantra “to each his/her farthest star.” His generativity was profuse and palpable, whether in his physical presence or in the large kindhearted shadow that he cast.

Joynt honed self-effacement to a high art. He was gracious and thankful of genuine praise, but he cautiously restrained ego and had a finely balanced sense of self. He wore his vast knowledge lightly. His humility was authentic and omnipresent, and this unassuming nature disarmed the arrogant. He avoided fanfare. Humility and humor were interchangeable currencies of the Joynt persona that exuded integrity and ease.

Joynt's humor was an essential element of engagement that helped develop relationships and forge compromise—vital attributes for a department chair and dean. Few are born and die with a twinkle in the eye—the oculofacial sparkle that Joynt enjoyed. The twinkle enhanced his jokes. His wit was quick, clean, and thought-provoking, and the delivery smooth and captivating.

Of course, there were those famed Joyntisms that took on generic meaning to connote a wise, humorous, and pithy saying that had wide applicability to humankind. There were hundreds of Joynt sayings. Here is a sampling: “Even a blind hog gets an acorn some time;” “I know there is a God when I have a martini in my hand;” “The only thing harder than being a saint is living with one;” “If you are going to teach a dog a new trick, you have to know more than the dog;” “Sincerity is the most important thing about being dean; once you’ve learned to fake that, the rest is easy;” “If you have 10 minutes to spend with a patient, spend 9 on the history;” “The problem with trouble is that it usually starts out as fun;” “I’d rather have a drink on the rocks than be on the rocks in the drink;” “Fanfare and gloating are the stuff that starts revolutions;” and “To a man with a big hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” And his favorite, “You can’t always be right, but you can always be kind. There is no limit to kindness.”

For all his accomplishments, ability, and wisdom, Bob Joynt stayed conspicuously modest and remarkably kind—a person the Irish call salt of the earth and many others call a real mensch—a good, kind, decent, and honorable human being.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.