Jeffrey W. Berger, MD, PhD (1963–2001)

The world of ophthalmology and vision science was diminished considerably on January 25, 2001, with the passing of Jeffrey W. Berger, MD, PhD. At the time, Jeff was assistant professor of ophthalmology (Retina Service) at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Computer Vision Laboratory at Penn’s Scheie Eye Institute. Until 3 weeks before his death, Jeff was a vital and vibrant husband, father, friend, physician, surgeon, teacher, and scientist. On Friday, January 12, 2001, just 1 week after becoming ill, he was diagnosed with gastric adenocarcinoma and passed away on January 25th. To the thousands of people whose lives he touched and to untold thousands whose lives he would have touched, his death represents an enormous loss.

In another sense, however, Jeff lived an extraordinarily full life compressed into just 37 years. In 1985 he was graduated from Princeton with a bachelor of science degree in engineering. In 1992 he obtained MD and PhD degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. His doctoral work was done in the field of optical engineering. After a residency at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard Medical School, Boston, he came to Scheie Eye Institute in 1996 as a fellow in vitreoretinal diseases and remained on the faculty until his death.

Jeff had an extraordinary number of accomplishments during his tenure at Scheie/Penn. He both founded and directed the Computer Vision Laboratory, an enterprise funded in part by his Research to Prevent Blindness Career Development Award and in part by his Mentored Clinician Scientist Award from the National Eye Institute. He also served as principal investigator of the Reading Center for the Complications of AMD [age-related macular degeneration] Prevention Trial (CAPT), a multicenter clinical trial funded by the National Eye Institute. Another grant application to the National Eye Institute had just been reviewed favorably.

In addition to his clinical practice and his position as chief of the Retina Service at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, Jeff was involved in collaborative research with ophthalmic investigators around the country and internationally. He had developed a system for evaluating digital fundus images applicable to patient care as well as to the evaluation of images from patients participating in randomized clinical trials. Unlike most ophthalmologists with publications limited to the ophthalmic literature, Jeff’s extensive bibliography also included peer-reviewed publications in the engineering literature. He was an expert on laser tissue interactions, optical imaging, and retinal diseases. Among his more important recent publications were a seminal review article on AMD that appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine (2000;342:483-492) and his principal editorship of the textbook Age-Related Macular Degeneration (Philadelphia, Pa: Mosby Inc;1998).

Jeff had a very full and meaningful life outside the field of ophthalmology. He was a loving husband and father to Karen and their 3 children, Adina, 11, Tamar, 8, and Joseph, 3. For his synagogue, family, and his community in Cherry Hill, NJ, he was a pillar of strength and a leader. For the faculty at Scheie Eye Institute, he was a valued and respected colleague. To fellows, residents, and medical students, he was an inspiring teacher who had received the department’s Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching the previous year. Jeff also served as a consultant to several national and international companies interested in the clinical applications of his innovative research.

On June 11, 2001, Jeff’s family, friends, and colleagues at Scheie/Penn gathered for a tribute to his life. This was organized by a friend and colleague, Maureen G. Maguire, PhD, the Carolyn Jones Professor of Ophthalmology and director of Scheie’s Center for Preventive Ophthalmology and Biostatistics and moderated by me. Those who participated in the program were Alan M. Laties, MD, Jeff’s mentor when he was a medical student; Alexander (Sandy) J. Brucker, MD, Jeff’s mentor during his vitreoretinal fellowship; Michael Tolentino, MD, Jeff’s mentee during his recently completed fellowship in vitreoretinal diseases; and Joshua Dunaeif, MD, PhD, currently a faculty colleague and a friend for more than 15 years. Karen Berger, Jeff’s loving and adoring wife, also offered comments to the more than 150 in attendance.

During the course of the tribute, I announced that the department would be remembering Jeff in several important ways. It has named its Clinician-Scientist Award the Jeffrey W. Berger Clinician-Scientist Award. This award assures faculty-level support for an individual of exceptional talent who is committed to an investigative career in ophthalmology and vision science. Jeffrey Berger himself was the first recipient of this award; the next recipient was Joshua Dunaeif, and the third recipient was Michael Tolentino. Interestingly, all 3 were extraordinarily successful in recruiting external support for their research and all became members of the full-time faculty. The second-named award is the Jeffrey W. Berger Student Research Scholarship. This award will provide a stipend to medical students who conduct research with a faculty member in the department.

At the Scheie Eye Institute, at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, at his synagogue, in his Cherry Hill community, in his family, and around the world, we continue to mourn our loss. We expect that with the passage of time our pain will diminish and we will focus on our wonderful interactions with Jeff. His contributions will continue to serve as a beacon that sheds light on the areas in which his insightful publications addressed unsolved problems in vision and ophthalmology.

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