Michael E. Yablonski, MD, PhD (1940–2005)

Michael E. Yablonski, MD, PhD, died peacefully in his daughter’s home on April 25, 2005, of cancer. He was a first-generation American man born in Minneapolis, Minn, on July 11, 1940, the oldest of 3 children, to Harry and Anne Yablonski. Mike’s grandparents and parents emigrated from Eastern Europe when his father was 13 years of age. Both his father and grandfather went to work immediately, his grandfather with the Soo Railroad and his father in an upholstery shop. Mike grew up in Minneapolis and graduated from the University of Minnesota College of Medicine, Minneapolis, in 1967. Following a surgical internship at Albert Einstein Medical School, Yeshiva University, Bronx, NY, he returned to Minneapolis and completed a PhD program in membrane transport physiology, a background experience that would serve him well in his career as a glaucomatologist. He served for 2 years in uniform at a US Navy research facility studying electroretinography. He completed his ophthalmology residency at the University of Minnesota in 1976, followed by a fellowship in glaucoma under the supervision of Bernard Becker, MD, at Washington University, St Louis, Mo. He began his career in academic ophthalmology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, and later moved to Cornell University Medical Center, New York, where he was chief of the glaucoma service from 1982 to 1990. Afterward, he moved to Omaha, Neb, where he was a professor and chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center from 1990 to 2000. During the last 5 years of his life, he was in private practice in Johnson City, NY.

As a department chair, Mike’s tremendous energy enabled him to conduct a busy full-time clinical practice, supervise and carry out numerous basic science and clinical research projects, and still find time for teaching and departmental administrative duties. He would assign himself certain teaching duties and would arrange his schedule around these commitments rather than pass the duty off to another faculty member. He had a particular passion for personally conducting the residents’ journal club, an activity that commenced at 7 AM. We recall a time when 3 residents, who had joined him on the trip, reacted to this 3 AM activity. He had myriad innovative ideas involving new techniques to assess aqueous humor dynamics, new surgical procedures, and other aspects of glaucoma diagnosis and treatment. He was always interested in new gadgets or applications that could be used in the clinic, laboratory, or operating room. He designed, tested, and even patented some of these.

In addition to his clinical and administrative duties, Mike established a strong glaucoma research laboratory. The team collaborated with Mike on many phase 3 and phase 4 clinical studies. He was a world leader in the assessment of aqueous humor dynamics. He made innovative advances in this field and was not afraid to forcefully defend some of his occasionally controversial ideas. He was one of the first investigators to explain the mechanism by which some of our medications work in glaucoma therapy. He published dozens of research articles, book chapters, and symposia, many of which related to new approaches to glaucoma therapy. He was the quintessential example of the “busy man who still had time to get something else done.”

On a personal level, Mike was very gregarious, likable, and fun-loving. Basically, he was just a very interesting person to be around. He enjoyed entertaining his friends and colleagues in his home, especially on weekend afternoons. These visits at times devolved into spontaneous musicals with Mike at the first-tenor position. He was extremely talented musically. He spent some time studying at the Juilliard School of Music, New York, and might have considered a career in opera rather than medicine. He was blessed with a strong and incredibly rich tenor voice that he shared with minimal provocation. He was constantly in demand as a cantor in the synagogue. For many years, he was a regular performer at the concerts at the annual meetings of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology and the American Academy of Ophthalmology. When he first arrived in Omaha, one of us, knowing of his interest, invited him to observe an audition for a men’s chorus planned for a professional-level production of Fiddler on the Roof. After being persuaded to sing at this event, the director offered him the leading role. His musical talent was also apparent when he was asked to sing the national anthem at an Omaha Royals baseball game.

Mike enjoyed a large family of children and stepchildren who have pursued a variety of careers, including law, teaching, science, and medicine. One daughter is a microbiologist working in a laboratory with 2 Nobel laureates. The upholstery shop started by his father is still in business today and is operated by Mike’s brother. His accomplishments, as well as those of his siblings and children, truly exemplify the American dream. Although Mike’s children and stepchildren live on and between both coasts and as far away as Israel, all of these family members were able to travel and spend time with him during his final illness.

He was a great mentor and a great friend. He was “one of a kind,” and we miss him.

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