Sydney S. Gellis, MD (1914-2002)

The world of pediatrics lost a giant when Sydney Gellis, MD, died on December 6 in Newton, Mass, at age 88 years. A better clinical teacher did not exist. Gellis taught at all 3 medical schools in Boston, Mass, but was most closely associated with the Floating Hospital for Children at Tufts University’s New England Medical Center, where he worked from 1965 until his official retirement in 2001. Gellis’s influence was felt far beyond Boston. His presence as a faculty member in continuing education programs ensured sellout audiences. His succinct comments on journal articles were devoured by readers of the Yearbook of Pediatrics and Pediatric Notes, both of which he edited.

The breadth of his knowledge was remarkable. Gellis was the quintessential pediatric generalist who was not deterred by the growing army of “-ologists.” I was a resident at Boston Children’s Hospital in the late 1950s. Even though he worked at another hospital, when we were stuck, Gellis was the ultimate “go-to guy.” I recall him coming to see an infant who was near death from unexplained weight loss. Gellis’s appearance at the hospital was always an event; a crowd of residents looked on. He took a history from the mother and carefully examined the infant. Instead of giving us a dissertation on failure-to-thrive, he imparted some simple advice: “Forget the diagnostic studies; get some calories into the kid.”

Gellis had firsthand experience with pediatric office practice and pediatric research. He worked with Joseph Stokes, MD, and Charles Janeway, MD, on the efficacy of γ-globulin in the prevention of hepatitis A. His great gift was being able to sift through the multitude of research articles and impart to physicians what was important to apply in their practices.

Gellis saw himself as a practicing physician involved in patient care, not an academician. He loved medicine and transmitted that feeling to trainees. Although he had a twinkle in his eye and made learning fun, Gellis had strong opinions about almost everything and was not afraid to be wrong. His written and spoken words were clearly stated. His abiding interest was helping frontline practitioners maintain the health of children. The death of this master clinical teacher leaves a large void in our specialty.

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