In Memoriam: David L. Epstein, MD, MMM (1943-2014)

M. Bruce Shields, MD

Ophthalmology has lost, all too soon, one of its true giants. David L. Epstein was big in every sense of the word. His physical stature was considerable, but what is more, his contributions to our profession and to humanity were enormous. Those of us who were privileged to call him a friend know the passion and joy with which he approached his life as a clinician-scientist, an educator, an administrator, and an advocate for our profession and for the patients we serve.

One of my fondest memories of David is sitting in lecture rooms with him and watching his intense expression as he listened to the speakers. He was a great listener and seemed to be interested in everything and always asked the most provocative and insightful questions. Like his beloved mentor, Morton Grant, he was more interested in the questions that had yet to be answered than in trying to impress us with what he already knew (which was considerable). From his early days in the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology in Boston, Massachusetts, to his research at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, he taught us much about the mechanisms of glaucoma and how to apply that knowledge to effective treatments. For 33 consecutive years, he maintained National Institutes of Health ROI funding, and, in 2005, he was a founder of Aerie Pharmaceuticals for the development of a promising glaucoma drug, which may yet be one of his legacies.

His Socratic method of teaching was unequalled, to which all his students, residents, and fellows over the years can attest. Each year, at our Chandler-Grant Glaucoma Society dinner, David would lead an hour of scientific discussion before the social time. All who attended those events will recall (with a lump in their throat) the way he challenged us to think about the mysteries of glaucoma with his curiosity, his honesty, and his wonderful sense of humor. He not only taught his protégés and colleagues, but he touched the careers of physicians and scientists around the world through his numerous national and international lectures and his publications. He delivered 26 named lectures (and I am humbled to note that the last one he gave was in my name at Yale this past fall) and had written more than 230 scientific articles and chapters, all of the finest quality. He was also editor of the third and fourth editions of Chandler and Grant’s Glaucoma, maintaining the high standards of his mentors.

In 1992, David came to Duke University where he became the Joseph A. C. Wadsworth Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology and served as chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology for 22 years. After receiving his master of medical management degree from Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2001, he proceeded to grow the Duke department into one of the leading programs in the country, most recently ranked eighth in US News and World Report and fourth in Ophthalmology Times. Over the past decade, he more than doubled both the clinical and scientific faculty to the current level of 72 members and sustained a 10% annual growth rate in clinical revenue. He oversaw a $50 million budget ($32 million clinical and $18 million research), which represented a 6-fold increase during the past decade. David was also a superb fund-raiser. He raised $26.5 million to build the Albert Eye Research Institute and increased the department’s endowment from $6 million to $38 million. His most recent accomplishment was to raise funds to erect a third building for clinical care. After years of planning, the foundation had just been laid a month before his untimely death. He was undoubtedly looking forward to the grand opening, and his presence will be strongly felt when we gather to celebrate his final great achievement.

The esteem in which he was held by his friends and colleagues is evidenced by the many offices he held and the numerous awards he received. He served as presidents of the Association of Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) and the Chandler-Grant Society, was both president and trustee for the Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology, and served as chief of staff at Duke University Hospital. In 1982, he received the Alcon Research Institute Award and most recently was awarded the Duke University School of Medicine Medical Alumni Association’s Distinguished Faculty Award in 2012 and the ARVO Mildred Weisenfeld Award for Excellence in Ophthalmology in 2013.

David is survived by his wife, Susan, and their son, Michael, and Michael’s wife, Lenea, and their 4-year-old son, Sam. He also leaves behind countless friends, colleagues, students, and patients whose lives he touched with his caring nature, honesty, humility, and zest for life. Although he was taken from us all too soon, when he still had so much to offer, his many contributions have clearly left the world a far better place than when he entered it.