

Aaron Lerner: A Mentor and Friend

In 1972, I was fortunate enough to be invited to be a first-year resident in the dermatology department at Yale for the next year and possessed just enough wisdom to accept. At Yale, Aaron Lerner had assembled an extraordinary group of full-time faculty members that at the time included his wife, Marguerite Lerner, Irwin Braverman, Joseph McGuire, Sidney Klaus, and D. Martin Carter. I spent two formative years as a dermatology resident, from 1973 to 1975.

For the Yale residents, the approach to learning dermatology was quite different from that of most training programs. Dr. Lerner told me many times that he believed the best way to learn something was to teach it to yourself, rather than having it taught to you by someone else. Consequently, the residency program contained almost no didactic teaching and no assigned textbook reading. This represented a clear philosophical choice by Dr. Lerner and the rest of the faculty for the education of dermatology residents, because when it came to teaching the Yale medical students, the department and its members continually received awards for their didactic lecturing and teaching. For the residents, learning from Dr. Lerner and the rest of the faculty was almost always in the context of a particular patient, rather than springing from an abstract discussion of particular disease entities. This approach had two important consequences for me. The first was that Dr. Lerner and the other faculty treated the residents more as junior colleagues than as trainees. The second was that I vividly remember floundering until several months into my residency, when I finally began to develop my own frame of reference for understanding dermatologic conditions.

Although I learned a great deal of clinical dermatology from Dr. Lerner, what really stood out for me was his intense interest in people, his patience, his inquiring mind, and his self-confidence without arrogance. He was constantly asking “why?” in response to my statements, or those of almost anybody else, because he wanted to understand the basis for our statements and thereby constructively challenged us to be clear in our own understanding and explanations. I initially mistook his soft-spo-

ken manner as reflecting a degree of aloofness, but I quickly recognized that he was eager to share his personal and family experiences, especially when he thought they might be relevant to a discussion. One of my favorite stories was about how, when he was growing up, the other mothers would constantly brag to his mother about the achievements of their children, and, according to him, she chose not to compete with them for bragging rights because they didn't interest her. Like his mother, Dr. Lerner was his own person directed primarily by what was important to him rather than what was important to others. His integrity and compassion, along with his pride in his family, left a deep impression on me.

It is well known that Dr. Lerner was deeply interested in pigmentation and its relationship to disease. My mother played a small role in this regard, as we have a family history of vitiligo, and my mother, whose disease was quite extensive, was also a long-term survivor of a deep melanoma. Her history, along with those of others, led Dr. Lerner to examine whether vitiligo might be associated with an improved melanoma prognosis.

After I left Yale and started my laboratory at the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Lerner remained interested in my professional career, my family, and my happiness. Whenever we saw each other, at meetings, on visits he made to the NIH or I to New Haven, or during telephone conversations, he would make sure I brought him up to date on all three areas. He was especially supportive of my research career, in his consistent confidence in my capabilities and his continued encouragement to challenge myself by tackling the most important scientific and medical problems within my area of expertise. This abiding interest, from the only dermatologist who was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, made a strong, lasting impression on me. However, I may have learned the most from him when, during a time of turbulence within my family, I was uncertain how to proceed. He told me that I needed to focus primarily on what would be best for my children. His wise advice and counsel served me well in that situation and many others. I am grateful for his having been an important mentor and friend who helped me professionally and personally.

Douglas R. Lowy

National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2007) **127**, 2092. doi:10.1038/sj.jid.5701012

Aaron Lerner Remembered

As everyone knows, Aaron Lerner was an astute clinician, an outstanding scientist, and an effective administrator. He did not write major textbooks, travel the old-boy lecture circuit, publish hundreds of scholarly papers, or join many clubs. Yet he may have been the most influential and widely respected dermatologist of the 20th century. How did that come to be? A few anecdotes and observations should help put a personal face on our thoughts regarding his unique position in dermatology.

Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2007) **127**, 2092–2094. doi:10.1038/sj.jid.5701006

Aaron Lerner had a long and long-lasting impact on our lives. As medical students, we found it hard not to notice that he had surrounded himself with a department of skilled physicians and successful scientists. Prior to his arrival in New Haven, it was rare to find a student entering Yale Medical School who wanted to become a dermatologist. Aaron's exemplary department (established well before the days of lifestyle considerations) changed that for many. By the time Ellen was finishing medical school, she knew she wanted to be a dermatologist. We also knew that it was time to leave New Haven. Aaron and Marguerite's fond recollections of their time in Portland, Oregon, and their high regard for Walter Lobitz as a chairman