



William Berenberg



William Berenberg was born October 29, 1915 in Haverhill, Massachusetts. He moved to Chelsea at a young age and was educated in the public high school before attending Harvard College as a day student. There he participated in basketball and baseball and was a member of the Phillips Brooks House. He compiled an excellent academic record allowing him to be admitted to Boston University School of Medicine from which he received his MD degree in 1940. He came to Children's Hospital as a pathology intern under Sidney Farber, following an internship year at the Brockton Hospital. His arrival at Children's Hospital was five months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor and shortly before the death of Dr. Kenneth Blackfan, Children's Hospital's long serving Physician in Chief. That began a commitment to an institution that he both loved and served for 60 years.

Following a year of residency training, he served during the war years from 1944 to 1945 as Dr. Richard Smith's last chief resident. His long time colleague Dr. Allen Crocker reflected that during that time "he was virtually a one man housestaff for a number of years." He then began a career that would include clinical care both as a practicing

pediatrician and as an expert on handicapped children; education as a teacher and mentor to untold numbers of housestaff over the years; clinical investigation developing the tools used in the care of children with cerebral palsy; and finally administration serving five chiefs of Medicine, Richard Smith, Charles Janeway, Mary Ellen Avery, David Nathan and Philip Pizzo in key departmental roles. He would rise to the rank of Professor of Pediatrics at the Medical School and in the Harvard MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology. At Children's Hospital he would serve as Associate Physician in Chief from 1969 to 1974. So great would be the respect for his contributions to pediatrics that the hospital, medical school and his patients' families and friends would establish the William Berenberg Professorship at the Harvard Medical School in his honor. His devoted wife would similarly give of such great service to the Children's Hospital that the hospital would establish a Blanche Berenberg Garden in her honor.

Following his chief residency, Bill Berenberg established a practice of pediatrics in the hospital and began to accumulate a wealth of experience in pediatric medicine. His lifetime concern for handicapped children had its roots in the 1955 polio epidemic when 2,200 cases of polio in Massachusetts occurred during a 10 week period. He described cars reaching from Temple Israel on the Fenway to the Children's Hospital waiting as the children were screened for hospital admission. The high rate of residual effects from the disease led the hospital to ask Bill Berenberg in 1952 to establish and lead a special Division of Services to Handicapped Children. Bill Berenberg's encyclopedic knowledge and vast clinical experience in pediatrics led to his being widely known as a master diagnostician. He cared for children from Brookline to Western Massachusetts, from Mexico and Ecuador to the Virgin Islands and Saudi Arabia, from the premature infant of President Kennedy to the unserved and needy of Boston and beyond, and from the child with a common pediatric illness to the patient afflicted with cerebral palsy. He served as interim chief of five divisions including oncology and neonatology as well as chief of the inpatient medical services. His invaluable service to the department was recognized by his department chair and friend David Nathan; "Bill really ran the clinical services for Charlie Janeway. He was then and remains today tremendously respected by the housestaff and colleagues. Unfortunately I don't know whether we're going to see another Bill Berenberg."

He became most known, however, at a local and ultimately at a national level, for his contributions to the care of children with cerebral palsy. As director of the Division for Handicapped Children for 44 years, with Bronson Crothers he established the first "multidisciplinary team approach" to the care of handicapped children which included neurologists, orthopedists, general pediatricians, psychologists and physical therapists in order to bring the most up to date care to these children. In 1953 he established in Wellesley the nation's first nursery school for children with cerebral palsy. Over his professional life he transformed the cerebral palsy program at Children's from a local effort serving a small number of patients to a national center serving over 1000 patients. Increasingly he became active on the national scene serving for over 30 years as the Vice President for Medical Affairs for the Cerebral Palsy Research and Education Foundation and receiving the Foundation's Distinguished Service and Research Award in 1959 and its Presidential Medal in 1987 as well as the Association's Weinstein Award in 1969 and Firestone Award in 1986 in recognition of his remarkable contributions.

Bill Berenberg was a remarkable teacher of medical students and housestaff throughout his career. His vast knowledge allowed him to offer insightful contributions at the bedside, in case conferences, and at Medical Grand Rounds. In fact he was responsible for the education of over 1000 residents over 40 years, his capacity to teach and mentor a stream of residents earning him the title of "The Godfather." His trainees included among others: researchers Zasloff and Cohen, Department Chairs' Abelson and Modlin, educators Goldbloom and Firstand Deans Pizzo and Spielberg. Devoted to his talented residents he often said that "he gave them a light so they could see their way." With Sherwin Keyv he led the housestaff in the 60s and 70s and was chair of the medical service's intern selection committee in the 80s. Of all the awards he received over a lifetime he was most proud to be the second recipient of the Charles A. Janeway Award in 1981, selected by the housestaff and given to that faculty member who was voted as the best teacher for that year at the hospital. As one of his trainees reflected "he teaches you how to be a good doctor, to treat your colleagues with respect and your patients with even more respect." Boston University School of Medicine honored him with an honorary AOA in 1980 and the Distinguished Alumnus Award in 1982 for his contributions to education. He attended his last senior resident rounds in 2000 when he was 84, his contributions as insightful and clear as they had been when he was in his 40s.

With his busy clinical, education and administrative life he still found time to do research and write. His research began in the late 40s when he and his chief Charles Janeway were studying the effect of intravenous gamma globulin in the treatment of measles and hepatitis. He was the second to receive the protein; Dr. Janeway, the first, spent the night at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital with a fever of 105, the result of a contaminated vial. Bill Berenberg greatly admired his chief and remained an abiding and loyal colleague and friend. In 1974 Bill Berenberg became the Director of the Harvard MIT Rehabilitation Engineering Center, a position he held for 14 years. The Center focused on new tools for the diagnosis and care of handicapped children. The Center developed new devices such as the Universal Communicator (where letters, numbers and words are controlled by a muscle movement) and gait testing (where computer targeting of affected muscles allowed for muscle specific treatment). At the national level he served as Chair of the Research Advisory Council for the Cerebral Palsy Research and Education Foundation. In 1973 he testified before Congress on behalf of the Rehabilitation Act which established a chain of academic research centers dedicated to the advancement of the treatment of handicapped children. Over his career Bill Berenberg published over 56 original articles as well as chapters and reviews on general pediatric subjects and on the diagnosis and treatment of cerebral palsy.

Dr. Berenberg became Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School in 1985 and Emeritus Chief of the Cerebral Palsy Division in 1996. He fully retired in March 2001 from the active staff at Children's Hospital after 60 years of devoted service. He had served his hospital in countless ways including serving as President of the Children's Hospital Staff Association and as President of the Children's Hospital Alumni Association. He was honored by the Dana Farber Hospital with their establishment of the William Berenberg Award presented annually to a senior faculty member for distinguished contributions. For his service as a consultant to Ecuador he received the Presidential Gold Medal. He was an active member of many medical societies including the Society for Pediatric Research, the American Pediatric Society, the New England Pediatric Society (which he served as its President) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (from which he received the Jacobi Award for Medical Research). He was actively involved with the Roxbury Latin School in the late 60s and early 70s and was made a Life Trustee – a great honor for a nonalumnus. Bill Berenberg's marriage to Blanche Berenberg was long and devoted. They had three children, Richard, who died at a young age, Jeffery, a second son and academic physician in Hawaii, and Barbara, a social worker. He was immensely proud of all three of his children. He had three grand children who gave him great joy and pleasure. Blanche Berenberg was a devoted medical wife. She invited housestaff often to the Berenberg home treating them warmly. She served for many years as a volunteer in the hospital and for her loyal service the Blanche Berenberg Garden was created. It stands today between the Farley building and Inpatient building, a refuge of rest and peacefulness amid the hectic activity of the busy hospital. Bill Berenberg died at the age of 89 from small bowel obstruction after declining health for several years. Bill Berenberg was a complete pediatrician. He entered medicine when antibiotics didn't exist and 60 years later was as keen and sharp as any of his younger colleagues. He was a father figure to three generations of doctors he trained. He is remembered by his colleagues for his encyclopedic memory, his totally engrossing stories, his loyalty, his wit and his devotion to his family and friends. Children's Hospital was his home, the staff and residents his family, the care of the sick child his passion. He will be sorely missed.

Respectfully submitted,

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