



Walter H. Abelmann



Photograph courtesy of Harvard-MIT Health Sciences and Technology

(1921-2011) Dr. Walter H. Abelmann was born in Frankfurt –am Main, Germany in 1921. As a teenager, The Nuremberg Race Laws promulgated in 1935 upended his life. Security for the family was uncertain so Walter, his parents and sister resettled in Zurich, Switzerland. Walter’s father died shortly thereafter. When the Nazi invasive territorial expansion became obvious, Walter immigrated to the United States with his widowed mother and sister at the urging of the American branch of his family. After a bachelor’s degree from Harvard in 1943, he received his MD degree from Rochester followed by residencies at the Harvard Service at Boston City Hospital and Memorial Hospital in New York.

After serving in the US Army Medical Corps, Dr. Abelmann returned to residency and fellowship training at the Harvard Medical Service and the Thorndike Laboratory where he became a full-time academic cardiologist, advancing to Professor of

Medicine at Harvard Medical School and Chief of Cardiology.

Dr. Abelmann’s research encompassed each major aspect of the heart. He studied the valves, the coronary circulation, hemodynamics, the electrical system and heart muscle. The last became his specialty as he examined myocarditis and cardiomyopathy in the experimental laboratory and on the hospital wards. Dr. Abelmann also examined lung and liver pathology. In 1960, he reported a new method of measuring bronchial arterial blood flow. His research led to the recognition and definition of high cardiac output states in patients with cirrhosis of the liver, bacterial pneumonia, disorders of the blood and nutritional deficiencies. He published more than 260 scientific papers and edited several books.

Dr. Abelmann was a highly regarded educator. At Harvard Medical School he taught basic science as well as clinical medicine. He intermittently reported on the distribution and needs of cardiology manpower, the education of physician-scientists and became deeply committed to the Harvard-MIT division of Health Sciences and Technology.

From 1943, when Walter Abelmann entered Harvard College, until his death in 2011, his footprints could

be found in most of Harvard University's citadels or affiliates. The highest concentration of footprints was in and about Harvard's scientific and medical institutions.

Dr. Abelmann became Chief of Cardiology at the former Beth Israel Hospital (BIH) when the Harvard Service at Boston City Hospital (BCH) was terminated. He skillfully merged the BCH co-investigators that accompanied him with the BIH staff that he inherited. He served as chief from 1974 until 1978 and subsequently as Chief of Cardiovascular Research until 1988, when he devoted his major efforts to the Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology with which he had been affiliated in teaching and administrative roles since its inception in 1970.

As a leader, Dr. Abelmann encouraged collaboration and conveyed his expectations and wishes with unmistakable clarity. He demanded the highest standards of performance, was pleased when they were met, and was overtly displeased with a sub-standard effort.

As a motivator, Dr. Abelmann explored short- and long-term goals with each of his staff and intermittently required progress reports.

Colleagues and trainees often spoke of his admirable personal qualities, citing honesty, impeccable integrity, sterling character, unimpeachable ethics and frequent displays of loyalty. It was comforting to work with him. Dr. Abelmann told each member where they stood in his grand scheme of things. Each sensed their value in the organization, and knew how to increase it.

There were many unexpected teaching moments during Dr. Abelmann's tenure. At one cardiology staff meeting, a participant jokingly made reference to a medical group by a disparaging distortion of its proper name. Dr. Abelmann branded the comment as humorless, offensive, and derogatory.

He never made a negative comment about another physician, nor could anyone imagine his doing so. He frequently reminded us that we were members of a privileged profession, that we should conduct ourselves accordingly, and that we should be supportive—not critical—of one another.

Trainees and others constantly learned by his example in the laboratory and at the bedside. His classical clinical teaching format was to stress the mechanisms of disease, their underlying scientific basis, their subjective and objective manifestations and their therapy.

As is the case with most academics, Dr. Abelmann was a member and leader of many professional organizations. He held fellowships in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American College of Cardiology (Trustee 1977-82) and the American College of Physicians. He was a member of the American Society of Clinical Investigation, the American Heart Association, the Massachusetts Heart Association (President 1966/7; Paul Dudley White Award, 1979), the New England Cardiovascular Society (President 1965/6) and the Association of University Cardiologists (President 1972/3). He was a member of several editorial boards including the New England Journal of Medicine (1972-1975). There is an adage, "If you want something done, ask a busy person." Although Dr. Abelmann had too many important responsibilities to waste time, he was always a gentleman, courteous, dignified, and usually appeared to be unhurried. He was efficient and had a reputation of having an imbedded "no nonsense" personality. Yet, he was gracious, had a wry sense of humor and was fun-loving. For example, at annual dinners at the St. Botolph Club that followed the Laurence B. Ellis Memorial lecture chaired by Dr. Abelmann, he was almost as uninhibited as most of his former BCH and Thorndike Laboratory buddies who told hilarious-witty stories, including some that bordered on the

irreverent.

Commenting on a recent diagnostic or therapeutic cardiac advance, Dr. Abelmann often positioned its importance within the context of history. In fact, one of his most memorable lectures at cardiac grand rounds was in 1993 titled *Our Rich Heritage: a brief history of cardiology*. As a collector of rare medical books and instruments, he preserved medical history for the short term and donated items to be archived for the long term at the Countway Library.

Dr. Abelmann made time to appreciate the world apart from medicine. He enjoyed the arts, was a student of world history and enjoyed skiing— a sport learned when a youth in Switzerland. Guided by an intuition, he purchased a recreational home in Jackson, New Hampshire as a base to ski with his family at Wildcat, Cranmore, Attitash, Black Mountain, and others during the winter and to hike during the remaining seasons. He was happiest in the circle of his family which included his wife Rena, five children and 9 grandchildren. Because of his insight and foresight, to this day his children and grandchildren continue to enjoy their recreational homestead in Jackson.

During his long journey, Walter touched the lives of a multitude of people. If they could express their feelings about him in unison, they would say “It was a privilege and an honor to have known Walter Abelmann.”

Respectfully submitted,

Stafford I Cohen, MD, *Chairperson*

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