



Robert Higgins Ebert



Robert Ebert served with distinction as Dean of Harvard's Faculty of Medicine for twelve years, from 1965 to 1977. These were tumultuous times in which many, including medical students, were questioning previous approaches to education in an atmosphere in which authority generally was under great suspicion. Meanwhile the University, and the nation as a whole, were plagued by uncertainty and division during the closing years of the Vietnam war. Dr. Ebert's seasoned approach, calm demeanor, and warm personality served Harvard well during these demanding years.

Dr. Ebert was born on September 10, 1914 in Minneapolis. When he was still young, the family moved to Chicago where his father, having trained in medicine in Minneapolis, pursued advanced

work in dermatology, later becoming a distinguished professor of dermatology at Rush Medical College and the University of Illinois. Undoubtedly the parent was an important influence on the development and career choices of his two sons, both of whom followed him into medicine. Ebert's early education took place at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago and at its High School. From there, he went on to attend the University of Chicago as an undergraduate, receiving his Bachelor of Science in 1936. Engaging in various aspects of college life beyond the classroom, he seemed to have a special talent for dramatic presentations, an interest which had continued from his high school years where he had been president of the dramatic club. His brother, Richard, suspected that his experience in drama stood him in good stead later when he was called upon to make presentations to all kinds of groups, sometimes in unpredictable circumstances. Upon completion of his first year of medical school at the University of Chicago, Bob was selected as a Rhodes Scholar. At Oxford, he was especially fortunate to come under the influence of Sir Howard Florey at the Dunn School of Pathology. His work at the Dunn School focused upon inflammatory reactions which he assessed by a modification of the transparent ear chamber technique in rabbits that permitted the direct observation of such changes, a method originally described by

Clark and Sandison. Awarded the D.Phil. in 1939, he returned to the University of Chicago, where he completed his medical studies in 1942. Coming to Boston for the first time in the same year, he served an internship in medicine until 1944 on the 2nd and 4th Medical Services at the Boston City Hospital. For two years thereafter, as the war with Japan was nearing its end, he spent a term of duty as a Navy doctor with assignment to the Second Marine Division as a combat surgeon in the Pacific theatre. His observation of the destructive effects of the war, and particularly what he saw on a visit to Nagasaki shortly after the American landing in the Japanese home lands, where he participated in caring for civilian casualties, left a deep impression.

On returning to the University of Chicago as a junior faculty member, Ebert picked up his studies of inflammation, and especially of tuberculosis, in collaboration with the experienced tuberculosis expert, Robert Bloch. In the following years he pursued a series of studies, both of the nature of the tuberculous infection and of means of controlling it, building upon his Oxford experience. Ascending the academic ladder, with promotion to full professor in 1955 at the age of 41, Dr. Ebert had become a valued faculty member, fully seasoned to the life of teaching and research in the academic environment.

In 1956 he was called to Western Reserve University in Cleveland where he became Hanna Payne Professor of Medicine and Director of Medicine at the University Hospitals. Here he continued his laboratory and clinical work related to tuberculosis, which included active membership, and soon the presidency, of the National Tuberculosis Association. He often expressed the view that the fight against this disease had not yet been won. But his interests and responsibilities also broadened, and he began to write thoughtfully about current problems in medical education including consideration of the relative roles of full-time and part-time faculty and the responsibilities of teaching hospitals to the communities around them. These interests were also incorporated in changes in the medical curriculum of Western Reserve by such innovations as medical student involvement in multi-disciplinary and long-term care clinics. It also seems likely that his involvement with a potential plan for providing medical care for the meat packers' union in Cleveland was a harbinger of a later major interest.

In 1964 he accepted the invitation to succeed Walter Bauer as Jackson Professor of Clinical Medicine and Chief of the Medical Services at the Massachusetts General Hospital. In this position he became responsible for a large and expanding enterprise in a period of rapid growth of academic medicine. It was also a time when there were important changes in attitudes to the provision of medical care as the Federal government's Medicare program was just being established. Change was also in the air at the MGH, including large new construction that was being orchestrated by the hospital's mercurial young director, John Knowles. Ebert had scarcely settled into this new range of activities when he was invited in 1965 by President Pusey to succeed Dr. George Berry as Dean of the Harvard Medical School.

Here, too, change was the order of the day. Berry had led the Medical School rather independently from other arms of the University. He had been a successful fund raiser, a builder of buildings, and a highly devoted and attentive administrator. The closeness of his attention to the School's workings, and

perhaps a measure of the comparatively smaller size of the Faculty at the time, can be appreciated by the fact that Dr. Berry personally served on each of its professorial ad hoc committees. A bacteriologist by background, Dr. Berry's perspective was somewhat different from his successor whose orientation was more toward Harvard's opportunities to contribute to patient care and to the developing issues in the practical world of health care organization.

With the emergence of group practice plans in the hospitals and the growing importance of financial sponsorship of medical care by insurance vehicles, the involvement of many faculty members with their institutions became closer. Ebert's administration responded to this trend and strengthened it by developing a new faculty appointment category, Clinical Full-Time. It was a significant departure. Professorships in the new category were granted for achievements of a more clinical character than those in the older, fiscally tenured classification. Those elected to either status were viewed as contributing equal value to the School. This broadened scope represented an extended responsibility for the School and implied an expanded view of the School's function in the clinical arena.

Given special impetus by the death of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, the Faculty focused heightened attention to its own imperfections in regard to diversity and to the same shortcoming in the student body. A vigorous response to this followed, in which the voice of David Potter, Professor of Neurobiology, was prominent, especially in regard to encouraging enrollment of minority medical students. This additional example of the broadening of the Medical School's awareness of the community around it was quite consistent with the long-held values of its Dean. He also recognized the emerging significance and potential of international matters to the Medical School, and accordingly established the office of Associate Dean for International Programs. In this role Dieter Koch-Weser arranged faculty and student exchanges to permit relationships with a wide variety of places around the globe.

As the Faculty increased in size, its collective sense became more difficult to determine by means of meetings open to all its members. An alternative mechanism was needed for evoking collective faculty opinion, and it was to meet this need that a broadly representative Faculty Council was created in 1975. A committee under the chairmanship of Albert Coons, Professor of Bacteriology and Immunology, gave considerable thought to its appropriate structure, an effort encouraged and supported by Dean Ebert.

Reexamination of the curriculum of study for medical students became another significant undertaking in Dr. Ebert's administration. Alexander Leaf and Howard Hiatt, both Professors of Medicine, led the way in a thorough review by the Curriculum Committee to evaluate and improve the course of study then in effect. The objective was to introduce more emphasis on problem solving and less on rote learning. A number of significant modifications were consequently made in the curriculum, always an area resistant to change. Such change is particularly difficult to accomplish, however, when a general consensus is sought in the process, an objective that Dr. Ebert's style prompted him to seek.

Several major developments involving entities outside the Harvard Medical School also took place during his administration in large measure because of his influence and direction. In 1969 he was instrumental in forming a distinguished group that founded the Harvard Community Health Plan, the first university-sponsored plan to provide comprehensive health care to a subscriber population. From the beginning, this development, perhaps the achievement for which Ebert will be associated as much as any other, was conceived in broad terms. In his application to the Commonwealth Fund for initial financial assistance for the project he described the existing circumstances this way,

“There is universal awareness of the exponential increase in medical knowledge, and of the role played by medical schools in the acquisition of new medical knowledge. It is perhaps less apparent that modern technology and sophisticated methods of diagnosis and treatment have been imposed upon a system of health care that was designed for another age. This system is ill-equipped to adapt to radical change. While universities have profoundly influenced the provision of health care by their contributions to biological knowledge, they have expended little effort to evaluate thoughtfully or attempt to reconstruct the health-care system that has had to absorb these changes.”

All of the co-founding physicians in the new venture were members of the Harvard faculty, and they shared his interest in improving the delivery of preventive and ambulatory care and in creating a clinical environment conducive to teaching and to the constant improvement in the quality of care. From a beginning involving two physicians and eighty-eight subscribers, the plan has grown to include some sixteen thousand physicians and over a million members. It is now known as Harvard Pilgrim Health Care. Dr. Ebert served as Chairman of the HCHP Board from its inception and upon retirement from the chairmanship continued to serve first as a member, then as honorary director for the remainder of his life. In 1980 he founded the Harvard Community Health Plan Foundation to encourage related programs of research, teaching, and community service. He acted as Chairman of the Foundation's Board from 1980 until 1996. It is also worth noting that the new environment created by the existence of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care potentiated the later founding, during the administration of Dean Tosteson, of a joint venture of the School and the Health Plan in which the first full-fledged academic department in a managed care organization was inaugurated in 1992, the Department of Ambulatory Care and Prevention. This department has grown vigorously and serves as a valuable focus for the current development of teaching and research in the ambulatory setting.

Yet another important departure under his direction was the establishment of the Harvard-M.I.T. program in Health Sciences Technology in 1970. The early instigators of this program included David Rutstein at Harvard and Murray Eden of M.I.T. The project was also aided importantly in its early stages by the redoubtable Henry Meadow, Associate Dean for Administration of the Medical School, and by Professor Walter Rosenblith of M.I.T., as well as Jerome Wiesner, M.I.T.'s President. Through it the great resources of the physical, engineering and biological sciences and the innovative environment at

M.I.T. were to be brought into the medical arena at a particularly telling point, the education of undergraduate medical students. To accomplish this end, a new Division, joining the two universities, was created under the leadership of Irving London. This Division made possible some new explorations of approaches to medical education and medical research not only as related to the natural sciences but also to the social and behavioral sciences. The students and faculty of this Division have added greatly to the strength of the School and served in some ways as the forerunners of the system of undergraduate societies that was to flower later.

On the completion of his years as Dean in 1977, the benefit of his many experiences, his knowledge of opportunities in the developing arena of health care, and his broad view of human needs generally, continued to be employed in somewhat new ways. He became President of the Milbank Memorial Fund from 1978 to 1984. This responsibility required him to live in New York City, but later, when he became a senior consultant to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation he moved on to Princeton for four years from 1984 to 1988 after which he was called back to take charge of the Milbank Fund for an additional period. During this time he also became a valued advisor to several foundations, especially The Commonwealth Fund.

Over the years his accumulated list of accomplishments, memberships, and responsibilities is long. He was a trustee of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, of Barnard College, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, of the Beth Israel Hospital, of the Mind Body Medical Institute, the Educational Development Center, the President's Biomedical Research Panel, the National Library of Medicine, Meharry Medical College, and The Rockefeller Foundation, among others. He was also a member of the Board of Directors of the Squibb Corporation, and of quite a number of professional societies, including the Association of American Physicians, of which he was elected both President and a Master, the Institute of Medicine, and others as well.

Bob Ebert's personal qualities were particularly noteworthy. He was widely recognized to be not just an extraordinarily accomplished and successful human being, but a man possessed of a particularly warm and engaging personality. In conversation he was direct and alert, always doing the person or group with whom he spoke the courtesy of full attention. Many remember his twinkling eyes and his characteristic bow tie. His baritone voice was commanding and could conveniently fill a room. He laughed a lot, and not infrequently at himself. His concern for the human problems of those around him was palpable and deeply ingrained. There were many times when this aspect of him, perhaps the perspective of a caring physician, governed his actions. One such event occurred during the anxious days when some of Harvard's undergraduate students had occupied a major building in the Yard. The story was that, against the advice of many present, he left a meeting of deans in Cambridge to go over to the scene of trouble out of real concern for the physical welfare of the students. He was heard to declare something to the effect that, "After all, I'm a doctor, you know."

Robert Ebert leaves behind him in the memories of his many friends and associates vivid recollections of a courteous, thoughtful, gracious, and considerate man. He gave no outward display that he was

aware of being at the top of his profession, walking as an equal with the great of the world. What was especially endearing was his sense of fun, his genuine enjoyment of so much of the seemingly insignificant give and take of ordinary life and social intercourse, which showed so well his interest in others.

He was supported and strengthened in these things by his wife, Emily. Their long life together stretched from their first meeting at Oxford and lasted through much of his professional career until her death in 1986. Emily was a highly intelligent, vital, and buoyant person who was a marvelous hostess, an enthusiastic partner, and a strong parent. Their three children, Elizabeth, John, and Thomas have each made significant contributions on their own. After Emily's death, and his first retirement from his post at the Milbank Fund, Bob stayed on in Princeton. In 1989 he married Barbara Bacheller Ford, an old friend and associate from his Harvard days. Barbara had worked in the office of Dean George Berry and later, in a responsible position in Dean Ebert's and Dean Tosteson's offices. Subsequently, she held a significant post in the office of the Secretary to the University. She is widely recognized to be a particularly sensitive and gifted person who has discharged major responsibilities with remarkable calm and effectiveness in the complex environment in which she became such a key figure. In 1990, several months after their marriage, Bob and Barbara moved back to Massachusetts, where they took up residence in Wayland. Their relationship for the final six years of his life was a particularly propitious and supportive one, continuing with special richness through his final illness.

Bob's final illness was prolonged and required him to meet the challenges of a slowly advancing, and ultimately incurable, cancer. This he did with great courage, maturity, and even with cheerfulness. His vision projected into the future up to the end of his life, a future that perplexes all of us so much just now. In a meeting of the Physicians' Group of the Health Centers Division of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, not long before his death on January 29, 1996, he told an attentive audience, "Do not forsake your values, for they will sustain you"

He will be remembered as a wise and warm leader whose values will long be with us. His were lasting contributions to the medicine of his generation and to the lives of so many around him.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph L. Dorsey, M.D.

Thomas S. Inui, M.D.

Dieter Koch-Weser, M.D.

Alexander Leaf, M.D.

Irving London, M.D.

Henry C. Meadow

Susan P. Pauker, M.D.

Robert Shenton

Paul S. Russell, *Chairperson*