



Allan L. Friedlich



Photograph Courtesy of the Massachusetts General Hospital archive

Dr. Allan L. Friedlich lived a remarkable and meaningful life and died of cancer on July 6, 2006. He was 89 years old. Allan was one of the country's elite cardiologists during the last half of the 20th century. Allan was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on April 24, 1917. At the age of 8, he declared that he wanted to be a doctor. He was particularly fascinated by anatomy, an interest that led him to bring home a bunch of cow's eyes — obtained from the local slaughter house — for dissection. He placed them under water in a sink, and his father practically fainted when he encountered them. A major childhood influence on Allan was his pediatrician, Dr. Lee Forest Hill, who was not only a great pediatrician but also a noble human being and a pillar in the community. While Allan was still a youth his family moved to New York. Allan vowed to go to Dartmouth College and Harvard Medical School following in the footsteps of his hero, Dr. Hill — and he did. Allan graduated from Dartmouth College

summa cum laude in 1939 and from Harvard Medical School (HMS) in 1943. At that time, two classes per year were graduated from HMS to increase the number of physicians available to the armed services.

Allan was a great raconteur, and he once told the story of how his medical school class was under the supervision of a “tin horn” captain in the army. On the first day of classes, the captain lined the class up at attention in the HMS quadrangle. He then delivered a long harangue, which ended with the words, “If you guys stick with me, we’ll make this the best medical school in Boston.” Allan graduated from HMS magna cum laude, was first in his class, and received the Henry A. Christian Award given to the graduate deemed to have been the most outstanding student. Dr. Christian was then the Physician-in-Chief at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. Dr. Christian wrote a personal letter to Allan in which he said, “By this action of the Harvard Medical School, you have become a marked man, one in whom lies the promise for the future; on this they have staked their judgment.”

After an accelerated internship at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), Allan entered the Air Force for 3 years. He was assigned as a medical officer to “Merrill’s Marauders,” who flew Chinese soldiers and supplies over a stretch of the Himalayas called “The Hump” from Burma and India into China to fight the Japanese. This was hazardous duty, and Allan had numerous intriguing stories of his time in the service. One I recall is that of a marauding tiger who had killed two people in a nearby village. Allan took up a position in a tree in the village, and after being in that tree all night he eventually shot and killed the tiger! After discharge from the Air Force, Allan returned to the MGH to finish his medical residency. He then spent 2 years at Johns Hopkins, one of which was with the legendary Dr. Helen Taussig who, with her predecessor Maude Abbot, defined the field of congenital heart disease.

At the invitation of Drs. Paul Dudley White and Edward Bland, Allan returned to MGH, finished his cardiology training, and joined the staff in 1952. He spent the rest of his professional life at MGH until his retirement in 1997 at the age of 80. With his colleagues Drs. Gordon Myers and Gordon Scannell (the first cardiac surgeon at the MGH), Allan founded the MGH Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory, and served as its co-director for 10 years. He and his colleagues were responsible for some seminal studies of pulmonary hypertension in patients with mitral stenosis. He became a Clinical Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School in 1984.

Above all else, Allan loved being a doctor, and he was a consummate physician. He cared passionately for his patients. Allan was almost always a perfect gentleman. On rare occasions he was capable of generating a bit of a temper. But the only time I ever saw this side of him was when he perceived a deficiency in the care of his patients. Contrasted with this day and age of moving patients through the office or hospital with lightning speed, Allan always took as much time as was necessary for proper medical care, and he took great pride in getting to know his patients well beyond their medical needs. He was devoted to his patients, and they were in turn devoted to him. Part of what made Allan so special was his attention to detail. He was meticulous and fastidious in everything that he did. Allan was a frequent fixture in the Phillips House Coronary Care Unit at MGH where he carefully reviewed his detailed notes which were precisely written in his flowing script on large white index cards. Decades of information was concisely summarized for each patient in his portable “Rolodex style” office notes. He always familiarized himself with their complex medical histories before going in to examine his patient who typically hung on every word of his management plan.

Allan loved the small stuff. He would often come up with important bits of information that had escaped others simply because of his insatiable curiosity and tenacity. As an example, he once had a patient with chronic heart failure referred to him from Bermuda because of unexplained episodes of acute pulmonary edema, despite careful adherence to a heart failure program. On taking a detailed history, Allan determined that the episodes always followed large storms. Allan concluded correctly that the cisterns in the man’s home in which rain water was collected for drinking water were being contaminated by ocean spray from the storms, giving the patient a periodic load of salt that caused the pulmonary edema.

Allan was also a superb teacher, and was at his best at the bedside. He was a master of the physical examination, which he emphasized in his teaching rounds. He had a keen wit and he often dropped pithy comments. One that has endured in the lexicon of aphorisms from MGH was his assessment of a baffling case as “This is the worst case of whatever it is that I have ever seen!”. One of his greatest satisfactions came from the teaching and mentoring of generations of house officers and cardiac trainees, many of whom have gone on to achieve major leadership roles in medicine. Allan was very involved in administration at MGH. He was accorded the honor of being for many years the staff representative on the highest governing board of the hospital. He worked very hard on behalf of the American Heart Association, and was on the board of directors of the national organization for several years. He was President of the Massachusetts Affiliate of the American Heart Association, and received the Paul Dudley White Award for outstanding service to that organization. Allan had a very close relationship with Dr. White. He worked tirelessly with Dr. White to found The International Society of Cardiology, which has evolved into the World Heart Federation. Dr. White chose Allan to be his personal physician, a role that Allan fulfilled for many years until Dr. White’s death in 1973. Allan used to speak very fondly of his “Uncle George,” who was George S. Kaufman, the renowned New York playwright and savant. He was the brother of Allan’s mother. The Friedlich family was very close to Kaufman, and his comedy “You Can’t Take It with You,” was based on the Friedlich family. Allan had a trove of delightfully funny anecdotes about “Uncle George”.

Allan was married to Elaine Ebenstein, who passed away in 1981. In 1983, he was remarried to Barbara Bennion. He is survived by three sons, Andrew, John, and Robert; three grandchildren; and one great grandchild. He had twin siblings, a brother Bruce, and a sister Kate, who are both deceased. In the HMS graduation letter to Allan, Dr. Christian also wrote “Some day, long in the future I trust, you will finish your life. May you in those last days look back on a life filled with the happy satisfaction of true accomplishment in all that you have undertaken.”

In his 89 years on this earth, Allan Friedlich was a great physician; an inspired teacher and mentor; a devoted family man; and a humanitarian. We can take solace in the fact that he more than fulfilled the conditions of the admonition given him by Dr. Christian 70 years ago.

We are indebted to Dr. Friedlich’s son, Andrew Friedlich, for much of the information contained in this tribute.

Respectfully submitted,
Roman W. DeSanctis, *Chairperson*
W. Gerald Austen
G. William Dec

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