



# Gerard William Ostheimer



In October of 1995, the anesthesia community was both bewildered and stunned by the announcement of the death of Dr. Gerard William Ostheimer. He had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 55. Thus came a truncated end to the stellar career of a charismatic physician; Vice Chairman of the Department of Anesthesia at Brigham and Women's Hospital; Professor of Anesthesiology at Harvard Medical School; Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Regional Anesthesia*; and friend, colleague and advisor to a worldwide community of regional and obstetric anesthesiologists.

Gerry was born on February 9, 1940 in Poughkeepsie, New York. He subsequently received the B.S. degree from St. Francis College in Loretto, Pennsylvania, then graduated from

the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1965. After a year of rotating internship at the Misericordia Hospital in Philadelphia, he plunged into three years of a busy anesthesia residency at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. Thereupon, he accepted two fellowship positions in succession, one in Cardiovascular Anesthesia at The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and the other, a research fellowship, in the Department of Anesthesia at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. During the Vietnam War, he served as Director of Anesthesia of the military hospital at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. Gerry obtained licenses to practice medicine in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, and in 1971 and 1972, he dually became a diplomate of the American Board of Anesthesiology and a Fellow of the American College of Anesthesiology.

What had commenced as a bright and burgeoning career, escalated to further heights in Gerry's chosen profession. He began as an anesthesiologist at Harvard Medical School's Boston Lying-In Hospital for Women in 1972 under the able tutelage of Drs. Milton H. Alper and Jess B. Weiss. He flourished in this environment by dint of industry, brilliance and an uncanny ability to engage and work well with people.

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

In 1976, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Anaesthesia, in 1983, promoted to Associate Professor of Anaesthesia, and in 1991, he achieved the prestigious title of Professor of Anaesthesia at Harvard Medical School.

In 1980, he was one of the prime organizers of the tri-hospital fusion of the Peter Bent Brigham, Robert Breck Brigham and the Boston Lying-In Hospital for Women into the Brigham and Women's Hospital. Shortly thereafter, in 1982, he assumed the position of Director of Obstetric Anesthesia at Brigham and Women's Hospital where, under his stewardship, the program expanded to provide anesthesia support for over 10,000 deliveries per year. During the decade of his directorship, he developed and guided the careers of many currently established obstetric anesthesiologists. In the mid-1980's, a poll of "Anesthesiology News" revealed that Brigham and Women's Hospital Obstetric Anesthesia Unit (under the aegis of Dr. G.W. Ostheimer) was the best in the U.S. The model of anesthetic care and administration he developed during his tenure serves as a template for countless obstetric units worldwide.

In 1988, two years prior to the decease of then Chairman of the Department of Anesthesia, Benjamin G. Covino, Dr. Ostheimer was appointed Vice Chairman of the Department of Anesthesia at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Gerry helped Ben to continue to set standards of practice for regional and obstetric anesthesia and pain management in the U.S. During that time, the Department of Anesthesia at Brigham and Women's Hospital was admirably known as the "House of Regional Anesthesia." Gerry's wife, Jane, used to refer to it fondly as the "Ben and Gerry Show." A steady stream of national and international physicians trained and conducted research in the department's facilities.

Gerry was one of the early organizers of both the American Society of Regional Anesthesia (ASRA) and the Society for Obstetric Anesthesia and Perinatology (SOAP), in both of which he became president and served with verve and competence. In addition, he actively participated in and helped the American Society of Anesthesiologists, the Massachusetts Society of Anesthesiologists, and the Massachusetts Medical Society in their political and educational efforts, by diligently and diplomatically serving on numerous committees.

*Regional Anesthesia* was one of the specialty's widely read journals, and was, indisputably, Gerry's key priority. Since 1990, under his focused direction, the journal had grown into an internationally recognized and highly respected publication, serving a worldwide community of regionalists, obstetric anesthesiologists, and physicians treating pain.

A prolific author per se, Gerry guided his fellows and junior faculty to achieve authorship of almost 200 manuscripts. His name appeared on over 65 original articles, 75 reviews and chapters, 10 textbooks and monographs, and 40 abstracts. An eloquent and organized lecturer, he was in great demand as a Visiting Professor at universities throughout the U.S. on 75 occasions over a 20-year period. He delivered 11 specially endowed lectures. Gerry's book, Manual of Obstetric Anesthesia became the most popular

book among trainees as well as established practitioners. Dr. Ostheimer can, also, be described as a pioneer among obstetric anesthesiologists to popularize the “Neonatal Neurobehavioral Score” which, ultimately, became a standard method to assay the effects of any new medications on the neonate.

As a human being, Gerry was a man of many dimensions and interests, an avid sportsman, hunter, and a skillful fly fisherman. His extensive collection of duck decoys and outdoor paraphernalia were museumed at his home and provided the seeds for many riveting stories and anecdotes about his hobbies. He had been an all-American baseball player at St. Francis College and also played in the minor leagues, albeit briefly. He jogged for exercise and fun, and for a few years on a more rigorous level, he participated in the Boston Marathon, as well. His *joie de vivre* was manifested in many other pastimes, not the least of which was elegant dining and a penchant for gourmet cuisine. Delighting in imparting his zest and pleasure to others, he would invite colleagues and juniors to his home on many a festive occasion. Many of us will recall the images and montages of Gerry, enthusiastically grilling meat marinated in his and Jane’s own specially concocted recipes for their guests. His residents joyfully remember his ordering rounds of sushi on the nights he was on-call, tempering the grueling routine of work with humor, food, guidance and camaraderie.

Gerry, as a friend, was legendary. This friendship existed, not only among his peers, but, also, juniors. It was not unusual for him to painstakingly go over points of a paper to be delivered by a fellow or a resident down to the minute detail. Many a nervously quaking novice resident was comforted by his reassuring arm around the shoulders and deft demonstration of essential anesthetic techniques. Gerry’s gregariousness, his storytelling, and his hilarious recounting of jokes (especially his “pop-ost” jokes) rendered him a popular and “much sought after staff member” with whom to work.

Impressive in physique and demeanor, he commanded awe, yet, collegial and approachable, he won and inspired lasting affection. He believed anesthesiologists to be the captains of the ship and taught his residents to conduct themselves as leaders by his own consummate example. He believed that communication was the best armor and weapon to combat any emergency situation which could quickly arise on the labor floor, and taught his residents to communicate with all, especially patients.

Surviving Dr. Ostheimer are his wife, Jane Ostheimer; his children from his marriage to Dr. Estherann Grace, Gerard Joseph Ostheimer and Kristen Grace Ostheimer; his stepchildren, Jane Hauser, David Hauser, and Wendy Hauser; his mother, Margaret Ostheimer; and his sister, Barbara Stanley. Gerry’s children remember him as someone who strove always to do the right thing. “He was an environmentalist,” according to his son, Gerry, “not because of a Utopian view of nature, but because respecting nature and leaving it untrammled for others to enjoy, was, simply, the right and moral thing to do.” Being a physician seemed a natural outcome to this world view – not as a means of earning a living, but because helping people would be the “right thing to do.” “My husband gave of himself completely in his life and in his death” writes wife, Jane. Because Gerry was a firm believer in organ and tissue donation, Jane carried out his wishes.

Gerry's premature departure has left an unfilled void in the hearts of his friends and family, and has deprived future generations of the further insights and guidance of a prodigious mentor and leader. The practice of anesthesia has lost an important arbiter of advancement, but his lifetime of teaching and administrative applications remain forever as incandescent beacons to illuminate and shape obstetric anesthesia safety and patient care.

Respectfully submitted,

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