



# Louis Zetzel



Louis Zetzel, clinical professor of medicine, *emeritus*, died on Sept. 14, 1993. He was born in 1909 in Chelsea, Mass. He graduated from Chelsea High School, entered Harvard College on scholarship at age 16 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1929. He was raised in a traditional Jewish setting, and his early intention was to become a rabbi. At Harvard College, he concentrated in Semitic languages and history, which (in his words), “seemed to fulfill my intellectual and spiritual needs.” He went on to Harvard Medical School, class of 1934, but only after his college tutor, the great Hebraic scholar, Professor Harry Wolfson, agreed to it. “For the longest time, [he] refused to send in, as then required, his recommendation and approval [for my medical school application], hoping to persuade me to remain in his field,” Lou explained. Lou did maintain a life-long interest in Jewish affairs and a commitment to Jewish causes.

After Lou’s medical training, which included fellowships in New York and Philadelphia, he joined the staff of Beth Israel Hospital, with which he remained closely associated throughout his career. He was chief of gastroenterology from 1956 to 1968. During World War II, he served in the Army Medical Corps, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was a member of the faculty of Harvard Medical School from 1939, and retired as clinical professor of medicine in 1975. For many years, he served on the admissions committee.

As an internist, he was an expert on diseases of the digestive tract. He was a distinguished teacher and mentor to younger doctors, and continued in private practice until 1986. Deeply committed to each of his patients, he made house calls until his retirement at the age of 77.

His bibliography includes close to 40 important research papers, scholarly reviews and book chapters in leading medical textbooks. His first paper, which was published in 1930, dealt with the identification of components in chicken liver that could be used in the treatment of pernicious anemia. His efforts to understand the role of gastrointestinal tract in the pathogenesis of anemia led him to carry out intubation studies, first on himself, and later on human volunteers. In 1943, his landmark paper on the motility of the human stomach, duodenum and jejunum was published in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*. In 1953,

he and Benjamin Banks published another important paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on the prognosis of patients with gastric ulcers treated without surgery.

Lou's major research contribution was elucidating the course and treatment of nonspecific ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. He described the natural history of both diseases, helped define the clinical distinctions between them, and demonstrated the usefulness of corticosteroids in their treatment. This work was published in a series of papers in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

He was profoundly influenced throughout his medical career by Herrman Blumgart, who was in Lou's words, "a mentor, role model, physician and patient, friend and fishing companion." Lou greatly admired his "wisdom, humility, compassion and joy in his work."

In this day when primary care is at last beginning to achieve the recognition it merits, Lou's view will perhaps attract even more attention than when he set it forth for his Harvard College 50th anniversary volume: "My idea of what a family physician should be means his availability to his patients, even if this entails the inconveniences and interruptions of his private life. The advantages to the physician in seeing, knowing and understanding better his patient when viewed in his natural setting at home are rewards which more than compensate for the extra effort."

In this report he also said that his "gratitude to Harvard College and its medical school knows no bounds. Whatever I have attained would not have been possible without their contribution."

All who knew him as a teacher and colleague speak almost with reverence of his qualities as a doctor. To obtain the perspectives of his patients the committee turned to a few:

Professor Victor Weisskopf said, "He was our family doctor--the old-fashioned, human doctor. He really cared. What was incredible was the fact that he was always available. He was just perfect for all of us."

Professor Walter Kaiser commented on "his profound compassion and his personal concern for patients." Professor Kaiser also mentioned the celebrated Zetzel ferocity. During his first visit to Lou's office, Lou took a phone call from another patient and seemed to erupt because the caller had clearly violated instructions with respect to activity. "Lou began shouting at the hapless caller," Professor Kaiser wrote. "[He] terminated the call by promising that 'I am coming to see you this afternoon, and I want to find you at home and in bed.'" Professor Kaiser reported that it could have been quite scary, except, he said, even as a new patient, he recognized that "Lou was incapable of being scary. It was fabricated fury." Professor Kaiser added that Lou subsequently "scolded me once or twice in almost the identical way. I came away from those scoldings consoled by his evident caring and feeling, not so much chastised as caressed."

Joseph Kirsner, professor of medicine at the University of Chicago, and one of the nation's most

distinguished gastroenterologists, expressed his gratitude for Lou's help in the care of his brother. He spoke of Lou, as a "very wise, very kind and perceptive physician, a good human being who...combines the continuing search for knowledge with the warmth of the humane doctor."

A colleague who helped look after Lou's patients when Lou was not in the city reported that when he "departed on his vacations, he left his itinerary and phone number not just with me, but also with his answering service in case his patients wanted to call him directly."

Lou's example remains alive with all in medicine whom he touched. One of his lessons left a profound mark on house staff and on medical students, and as one of our committee members can attest, on the then physician in chief of Beth Israel Hospital. The classroom was a nurses' station at the hospital. The year was in the mid-1960's, and the month one during which Lou and Howard Hiatt were both on service--Lou for patients on the fourth floor, and Howard for those on the sixth.

At 1 a.m., Howard had returned to the hospital because a patient had developed an emergency problem. The problem was resolved, and Howard was about to leave when the resident in charge told him of an urgent situation that had arisen on the fourth floor. Clearly the house staff had already managed things well, and the resident asked whether he should disturb Dr. Zetzel. Howard asked about his instructions from Dr. Zetzel concerning such issues, although he knew well the answer. The resident reported that Dr. Zetzel had asked that he be called whenever a patient on his service developed a problem that might be serious. "But," said the resident, "we do have things in hand and we could quickly review them with you, and thereby spare Dr. Zetzel a trip to the hospital." Then, knowing Lou far better than did the resident, Howard suggested that he telephone Lou, tell him that things were in hand, indicate that Dr. Hiatt was in the hospital for other reasons, could see the patient, and was willing to certify to him that the proper steps had been taken. Howard had privately anticipated the nature of Lou's response to that call, but had underestimated its forcefulness. The somewhat red-faced resident returned a few minutes later to say that he had awakened Dr. Zetzel, and that Lou has been somewhat more emphatic than was his wont. He said he had been instructed to "tell Dr. Hiatt that I'm grateful for his offer, but when decisions are made on patients for whom I'm responsible, I'll take part in those decisions."

At morning report, Howard learned that Lou had arrived within 15 minutes. He also found a group of residents and medical students who had imprinted in their consciousness how a committed physician looks at the issue of responsibility for his patients.

Recognition of his professional achievements came from many quarters and include a visiting professorship in his name at Beth Israel Hospital, which was established on the occasion of his 75th birthday by his grateful patients, friends and colleagues. Since the professorship's inception in 1985, leading international authorities in the area of digestive diseases have served as the Louis Zetzel Visiting Professor.

Until almost the end of his life, his hobbies included growing orchids and playing tennis, but the latter only “when a young, vigorous and enthusiastic doubles partner is available who will not poach excessively on my carefully staked-out territory.” He also had a long-standing infatuation with fly fishing that took him to many parts of the world. He allowed himself to be seduced at times by blues, tarpon, snook and Atlantic salmon.

He was a man of great energy and feeling. He could be gratified beyond description by the caring performance of a medical student or an intern, passionately outraged by a colleague’s callousness toward a patient, overjoyed about a Ted Williams’s home run, angered by a tennis partner’s lapse on the court, and made wonderfully happy by a day’s fly fishing in the Adirondacks.

Lou’s first marriage was in 1934 to Muriel Bashlow, a social worker, who died in 1947. Their two daughters are Ellen Z. Lambert of New York and Judith Z. Nathanson of Philadelphia. Lou’s second marriage was to Elizabeth Rosenberg Guttman, a psychiatrist, who died in 1970. Their son is James E.G. Zetzel of New York. Lou is also survived by his third wife, Geraldine Warburg Kohlenberg, an educator and poet, whom he married in 1972. Her two children, and his step-children are Teresa Kohlenberg of Watertown, and Andrew Max Kohlenberg of Providence, R.I. He had three grandchildren, and two step-grandchildren.

A common theme emerges about Lou Zetzel--a decent, loving, intelligent, thoroughly committed man who touched deeply all of those who were fortunate enough to have known him. He helped his patients overcome or, when that was not possible, deal with adversity. He shared their joys and their sorrows. He helped his colleagues, and particularly his students, discover what a rewarding profession medicine can be. Lou enriched us all. Not surprisingly, there was a price. And that price was paid in no small part by his family, who shared him with others, and who added immeasurably to his strength.

Respectfully submitted,

Howard Hiatt, *chairman*

Raj K. Goyal

George Kurland

Stanley Rosenberg

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