Henry B. Betts, MD

It is with deep sadness that I inform you that our dear friend and mentor, Henry B. Betts, MD, died on Sunday, January 4, 2015 at the age of 86. He meant a great deal to each of us personally and to the community at large. He was as warm, caring, and personable as he was visionary, dynamic, and inspirational. So much of what we do today, and the way that we do it, derives directly from Dr. Betts’ ideas and teaching.

Henry was born in New Rochelle, NY, and raised in Flemington, NJ, where he attended a one-room school house taught by a teacher who had a disability. He also had a family member with a disability. He moved with his family to Coconut Grove, FL, and later received his degrees from Princeton and the University of Virginia Medical School. His medical internship in Cincinnati was followed by 2 years of service in the Marine Corps. He completed his Residency in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at New York University Medical Center with Dr Howard Rusk, and a 2-year fellowship in leadership at NYU. After Joseph Kennedy had a stroke, Dr. Betts provided direct full-time care to him, spending considerable time interacting with the Kennedy family.

In 1963, Henry moved to Chicago, where he later became Medical Director at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, when the Institute was in an old converted warehouse on Ohio Street. He provided direct care to patients, and grew the program in size, stature, and impact. He developed a reputation for not only providing care for the medical
problems of people with disabilities, but also for dealing with their psychological issues and social situations. Accordingly, he built the rehabilitation team around addressing the totality of the patient experience, including therapy disciplines, social workers, psychologists, therapeutic recreation specialists, vocational counselors, and other physicians. The importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, the team approach to care, and the need for the involvement of the patient and family were hallmarks of the care provided. He had the foresight to note that “most of what goes on in rehabilitation goes on after they’re here, being integrated into society, taking up athletics, art, writing, painting,…”. He made a point of addressing issues such as accessible housing, employment, sexuality, recreational activities, ethics, and many others. In the early 1970s, after extensive planning and work with community leaders, he initiated the construction of the building that currently houses the RIC flagship hospital and major programs. He remained in the role of Medical Director until 1994. He also served as CEO of RIC from 1986 through 1997. He told us repeatedly to “Listen to your patients”, and to his credit, he applied this principle not only to his work as a physician, but to the decisions he made as a builder and leader of an institution.

Consistently demonstrating the extent to which he valued education and ensuring the care of people with disabilities in the future, Dr. Betts started the PM&R Residency program, medical student training experiences, and the large continuing education center for allied health and nursing professionals. He consistently understood and espoused the importance of the role of science and research in the development of the specialty of medical rehabilitation and the care of people with disabilities. For these reasons, he created the research program at RIC, providing support for it to grow. He also was responsible for establishing and
maintaining the affiliation of RIC with Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, serving as the Chairman of PM&R until 1994 and as the Paul B Magnuson Professor until 1998.

Recognizing that empowerment of people with disabilities was a civil rights issue that impacted the quality of life for people with disabilities, advocacy for and with people with disabilities was a central theme of his career. Henry was a strong supporter of the independent living movement. He helped to establish Access Living. He was active in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. His commitment to employment and empowerment of people with disabilities continued late into his life.

He created an environment in which diversity, equality, and shared commitment are valued. He trained us in the importance of collaboration – with other professionals and with people with disabilities. Through his demeanor and his words, he frequently reminded us of the importance of effective communication. He helped each of us who work in rehabilitation to discover our own humanity, and to apply that humanity to the work that we do. He infused that sense of humanity into RIC and into all who interacted with him.

Dr. Betts did all of this as a physician, an educator, a leader, and a caring citizen. We knew him as a dynamic speaker and a great storyteller. However, we also knew him as a colleague, a close friend, a member of our family. He was a kind and generous man, with whom colleagues, friends, and patients loved spending time. He readily shared with others his thoughts, his humor, and mostly, his support and compassion. He knew how to have fun, how to engage individuals and a crowd. People who interacted with him would often make the observation that he made them feel
like they were the only ones who mattered. He led through inspiration and through his deeds,

Henry was known as “someone who just wouldn’t take no for an answer”, relentless without being antagonistic. Most importantly, he was passionate about the need to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities. For the opportunity to have benefitted from his inspiration and commitment, we are enormously grateful.

Henry is survived by his loving wife Monika, his daughter Amanda and son-in-law Trevor, and his granddaughter, Lucia.

Although he will be sorely missed by all of us who knew him and interacted with him, we are comforted in the knowledge that our own commitment to the values he cherished and the daily work that we do will enable us to carry on his legacy.

Elliot J. Roth, MD
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