

Walter E. Berdon, MD (1930–2017)

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Dr. Walter Evan Berdon, professor of medicine and radiology at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center, died Aug. 6, 2017, after a long illness. He was 87. His illustrious career was filled with innumerable honors, including presidencies (Society for Pediatric Radiology, New York Roentgen Ray Society), gold medals (Society for Pediatric Radiology, American Roentgen Ray Society), honorary memberships (European Society of Paediatric Radiology, Australian and New Zealand Society for Paediatric Radiology)

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and speaking engagements at almost every named lectureship in pediatric radiology. However, Walter will be remembered most for his unique enthusiasm, endless knowledge, and his impact on his colleagues.

Walter would say that he was both a clinician and a clinical researcher. His intellectual curiosity and distinctly astute “eye” placed him at the forefront of pediatric radiology. Walter spent his entire career, spanning more than five decades, at Babies Hospital in New York City, where, through his professional relationships and friendships with legendary clinicians — including pathologists Bill Blanc and John Wigger, pulmonologists Dorothy Andersen and Bob Mellins, neonatologists William Silverman, Stanley James and John Driscoll, and surgeons Tom Santulli, John Schullinger, Charlie Stolar, and Peter Altman — Walter honed his knowledge of pediatric diseases and developed a comprehensive approach to radiographic interpretation. Walter never forgot a case and had the ability to draw on his incredible memory to synthesize old and new information in order to make difficult and obscure diagnoses.

The first generation of pediatric radiologists (John Caffey, Ed Neuhauser and Fred Silverman) recognized and admired Walter's extraordinary skills and invited him to join their select societies and serve as an author in *Caffey's Pediatric Diagnostic Imaging*. The second generation — his peers — eagerly sought his opinion and he, in turn, respected their abilities and never hesitated to reach out for their input.

Walter was the 75th member of the Society for Pediatric Radiology (SPR). The first meeting he attended was in the early 1960s. He took pride in his role of broadening the interests of the Society beyond bone dysplasias and “little people.” When he became president in 1979, he opened the door through simultaneous sessions to our many subspecialties, particularly ultrasonography. Those of us who knew Walter appreciated his strong and innovative leadership. His presence, comments and questions at SPR

meetings were an integral part of the Society. During his long reign as the North American editor of *Pediatric Radiology*, the readership was fascinated by and gained great insight from Walter's many impactful commentaries (sometimes more than from the actual articles).

Walter thought it was important to know the history of the diagnosticians of the past and their descriptions of the diseases. He always sought the first published article on a subject and in each of his lectures he devoted a brief portion to the historical background of the entity. Lack of historical knowledge, Walter would say, only resulted in repetition of previous failures. He spent hours in the library browsing current medical journals and delving into the myriad subjects that interested him. He was not a child of the computer era but quickly learned how to effectively research the Internet, first with Medline and then with Google Scholar.

Whenever Walter became fascinated with a topic, he was relentless and researched it endlessly. Often he would discover a photograph of a diagnostician he had been searching for or correspondence or any historical document that contributed to his research, and on these occasions his excitement was palpable and he would share his discovery and its contribution to his research with anyone who would listen. In the course of many of his projects, he began correspondence with authors who were experts on the topic. This correspondence led to his many pen pals located all over the world. He created strong bonds with his counterparts in Europe as well as in Israel and Australia.

Over the course of his career, as each new imaging modality was introduced, Walter became proficient with it and spent a great deal of time learning the science behind it. In the 1980s, there were no ultrasound technologists at Babies Hospital at night. Walter, accompanied by his wife, Rosemary, who did not want him to drive to Washington Heights alone, would come in and he would be both technologist and diagnostician. It was this experience that led him to propose ultrasound as the first modality for babies suspected of having intussusception. This is his single major, universally accepted innovation that he never published.

Walter was adamant that it was our job as academicians to publish. He published more than 250 articles, chapters and case reports over a 53-year span (1962–2015), many of which have become classics in the field, setting the standard of care or describing new diseases or techniques. His landmark scholarly works include articles on rings and slings, necrotizing enterocolitis, the description of megacystis-microcolon syndrome, and high kV magnified fluoroscopy evaluation of the pediatric airway. Every time we spoke over the years and even when he was ill, the first question would be, "So what are you working on?" We would be afraid *not* to be working on something, and when we told him about our feeble project, he would immediately help by asking questions and enhancing or changing our approach. He would assign us new or related projects to think about. His comments

may not have been subtle but were meant in the best possible way and were right on. It is for this reason that he thrived and was successful as the American editor of *Pediatric Radiology* for 20 years (he served the previous 10 years as one of three North American corresponding secretaries with Cliff Harris and Barney Reilly). His goal as editor was to help each author make his or her submission better, and he worked tirelessly to make submissions acceptable or at worst to clarify for the author the problems with the article. His successors as North American editor, Dr. Tom Slovis and Dr. Peter Strouse, have continued to follow Walter's teaching of Cliff Harris's motto: "Is it new, is it true, is it useful?" He loved case reports because they brought us back to the patient, and he railed against those who wanted to do away with such reports because we would improve our impact factor. He wanted the journal to publish controversial practices and present in-depth discussions by the most qualified practitioners. He always regretted that we missed the whole "craniosynostosis controversy" of the '80s and '90s.

Walter lived vicariously through his fellows, encouraged their success and was so proud of their accomplishments. At Columbia Presbyterian Babies Hospital, he trained over 30 fellows. Although he was often uninhibited in his comments, his fellows quickly learned that each point he made encouraged them to think more clearly about the problems under discussion. His most cogent statement was "the discussion begins when the diagnosis is made." His residents and fellows loved him.

Walter's relationship with David Baker, with whom he partnered for 20 years, was remarkable. David was the prototypic New Englander, recipient of the Bronze Star at the Battle of the Bulge (World War II), politically correct, conservative and quieter but no less knowledgeable than Walter. In contrast, Walter was a born and bred New Yorker who served in the Navy through the Berry Plan. He could not be classified as conservative or politically correct, but bubbled over with enthusiasm, and he was the initial spokesman for the team. They shared the desire to advocate for children and to provide the newest techniques and imaging modalities. As such they continuously demanded resources of the New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University adult department for Babies Hospital, frequently at their peril.

David played golf, loved Cape Cod and taught Walter to sail. This was a wonderful pastime for Walter, which he enjoyed until his illness. They developed such a strong bond, one could finish the sentence of the other. They trusted each other. Walter would place David's slides in the carousel and David would give the talk without reviewing them. They were the most outstanding team of their era (1962–1981), after which David became chairman of the Department of Radiology at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and Walter a division chief at Babies Hospital.

Their collaborative work and friendship continued until Walter's death.

Walter and Rosemary were married 52 years until her death in 2007. They were devoted to each other and to their three children, Victoria Berdon, Cynthia Berdon Stern and Andrew Berdon, and their grandchildren (Matthew, Allie, Dori and Aaron). They all loved the American West and our national parks, particularly the Grand Teton. Many happy hours were spent as a family in Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. In his last years, Walter was incredibly fortunate to find a devoted companion in Lolly Raphael, who matched Walter's energy and love of life. She kept him young and engaged.

Walter was our Renaissance Man. He was encyclopedic not only about medicine but about religion, politics, histo-

ry, movies and literature. He was a people person and treated everyone equally and with respect, regardless of their title or stature. He would speak to anyone, about any subject — not just medicine. He connected with all kinds of people, including waiters, busboys, the plumber, his colleagues, his students and his grandkids. He would ask them about their lives and talk to them about what interested them. To them, he was not Walter Berdon the brilliant academician but simply Walter.

Walter, we will miss you for all of it — your science, insight and advocacy, and your place in our lives as a role model and mentor. We will yearn for your irreplaceable old-school academics and unquestionable loyalty and friendship. You were a giant among the giants.