Harry K. Genant 1942–2021

Reflections on the passing of a radiology icon

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I am writing this with profound sadness related to the loss of my good friend Harry K. Genant, M.D., who, in the evening of January 14th, passed away peacefully at his home in Napa, surrounded by his loving family. Yes, I will detail some of the extraordinary achievements and accomplishments of this physician and scientist, knowing that it is impossible to

list them all, but I will also explain how my sadness today is coupled with an appreciation of how fortunate I was to know Harry, to spend time with him, and to learn from him and hopefully to teach him as well and to remember our meaningful conversations and our good-natured banter through so many years. Even as I compose this tribute, those memories bring a smile to my face.

Harry was born in Freeport, Illinois, on August 14, 1942, the third of three children of Harry Genant, Sr., and Helen Genant, with two older sisters, Judy and Jewel. Harry's father owned a paint/hardware store in Riverside, Illinois. Harry's early education in Illinois was at the Riverside Brookfield Township High School, followed by a brief stint at the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs (I recently learned that he initially wanted to be an astronaut). After completing the Academy's summer basic training program in 1960, Harry concluded that military life was not a good match for him, and he transferred into a fast-track pre-medical undergraduate program at the University of Illinois, Urbana, from 1960 to 1963 that allowed him to immediately enter medical school. Harry received his medical degree from Northwestern University in Chicago, graduating in 1967. Then came an internship on the Osler Service at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and residencies in medicine and radiology at the University of Chicago from 1968 to 1971, becoming chief resident and assistant professor in Radiology in 1972. In 1974, Harry moved west, joining the radiology faculty at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), as Chief of Musculoskeletal Radiology. It was about that time that I first met Harry. He appeared one day in the back of the conference room at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in San Diego where I, having 2 years earlier joined the radiology faculty of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), was teaching a small group of residents. I acknowledged his presence, not knowing who he was, and his first words to me were, "Hello, I am Harry Genant from San Francisco." I had no idea at the time that Harry and I had just begun an association and friendship that would last almost 50 years. Harry remained at

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UCSF for more than three decades, becoming Professor of Radiology, of Medicine, of Epidemiology and of Orthopedic Surgery. In fact, I and others often would tease him—surely, he would be announcing additional departmental affiliations in the near future!

While on the faculty at UCSF, Harry's energy, enthusiasm, and unwavering positive attitude, combined with his clinical expertise and inquisitive mind, led to so many achievements that it is difficult, no impossible, to summarize all of these here. Scores of residents, medical students, and clinical and research fellows benefited from their contact with Harry, whether it was at the view box or, later, in front of a computer screen with only a few in attendance or at the podium at national and international meetings with hundreds in the audience. Harry was a communicator par excellence, eloquent in his delivery and skilled in his messaging. He was sought after as a lecturer, highlighting many of the most important scientific gatherings for decades.

Alongside all of his clinical and teaching accomplishments, Harry's record of meaningful and clinically important research deserves emphasis. His initial research interest is related to bone mineral density. Jay Mall, a co-resident with Harry, recalls an incident when both he and Harry attended a course on this subject in Detroit with pre-eminent expert speakers, during which, while in the audience, Harry turned to Jay and said, "Jay, in 25 years, I want to be up there looking down rather than out here looking up." And, so, indeed, that came to pass. While at UCSF, Harry founded the Osteoporosis and Arthritis Research Group (OARG) and served as its Executive Director until his retirement in 2004. The objective of this group was to develop and then assess noninvasive and quantitative imaging methods for osteoporosis and arthritis, an objective that was pursued by scores of OARG physicians, scientists, and research associates. Indeed, Harry's intense interest in metabolic disorders affecting the skeleton and articular diseases has guided him in many of his research activities, culminating recently by his receiving the Medal of Achievement of the International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) that is "awarded to an individual who has significantly advanced the field of osteoporosis through original and outstanding scientific contributions." In 1998, Harry co-founded Synarc, Inc. (currently, Bioclinica), an organization that placed an emphasis on identifying and testing both quantitative imaging methods and biomarkers in large national and international drug trials. His affiliation with Synarc in one role or another continued throughout the remainder of his life.

The aforementioned achievements are noteworthy on their own, but they represent only a portion of what Harry brought to radiology, during both his active time at UCSF and, following that, his years with emeritus status. His curriculum vitae, pages and pages in length, indicates the incredible number of articles (about 600 in peer-reviewed journals), abstracts (about 1500), books (about 40), and book chapters (about 300) authored or co-authored by this man. It further lists his many

awards (including honorary lifetime membership in the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, and honorary memberships in the Italian Radiological Society, the International Society for the Study of the Lumbar Spine, the Chilean Society of Osteology, the Hungarian Society of Osteology, and the European Society of Skeletal Radiology). Among his honors are delivering the Annual Oration at the 2004 meeting of the RSNA, being chosen as the Louis Avioli Annual Lecturer by the American Society of Bone and Mineral Disease in 2012 and receiving the Paul D. Miller Service Award from the International Society for Clinical Densitometry in 2013. Further, he served as President of the Association of University Radiologists, First President and Founder of the International Bone Density Workshop Series, and Chair of the WHO Task Force in Osteoporosis. He was a Fellow of the American College of Radiology and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Radiologists. Harry was an Editor or Associate Editor or on the Editorial Board of many top-notch journals.

I wanted to single out Harry's affiliation with and contributions to the International Skeletal Society (ISS). Harry was a Founding Member of that society in 1974 and, through the years, attended each of the annual meetings of the ISS through 2019, with the 2020 meeting being entirely virtual. Harry served on countless committees and held almost all of the executive positions in the ISS, becoming President in 2004. Through his many formal lectures, incisive comments following lectures and case presentations of others, and committee and executive policy decisions, Harry contributed immensely to the success of the ISS.

Listed in his CV are the names of the many Postgraduate Fellows who spent time at UCSF, supervised by Harry. This list is impressive not just because there are hundreds of these fellows but, also, because included are names of national and international clinicians and researchers who have subsequently become leaders in the field. Clyde Helms, Harry's first clinical fellow, indicates that "not only brilliant, Harry was kind and supportive to those around him. I was lucky to be a close friend." I am confident that other fellows and scholars share Clyde's assessment as well as my sadness today. From his good friend and fellow entrepreneur, Charles Peterfy, "now that he is gone, there is a hole in my life—and in the world—that can never be filled."

In the late 1970s, a small group of musculoskeletal radiologists began to meet annually, to share thoughts and, later, to offer a yearly bone imaging conference. The initial group consisted of about 10 radiologists but later became a smaller group of seven. Harry and I were two of the members of that group. We called ourselves "Young Bone Radiologists" because, yes, we were young at that time. Those meetings took place for 27 consecutive years, from 1978 to 2004, almost always in Sun Valley, Idaho, during ski season, and, some years, they were supplemented by a summer meeting as well. For me and, I certainly believe, for Harry, this was our support

group away from home. The friendships and comradery that developed among these radiologists and their families were remarkable. Harry was the best skier in the group and would often challenge some of us by leading the group to a single or double black diamond ski run. As you know, Harry was a remarkable athlete, not just as a skier but as a cyclist, runner, and even marathoner. He competed in the 1982 Hawaii Ironman triathlon competition and several Bay to Breakers races, sometimes running together with his son Jonathan, and Harry also hiked or biked about the hills of Tiburon and Napa and on nearby Mt. Tam, often with his son Justin and daughter Laura. He also was the best dresser of our group, with the newest and flashiest ski outfits and even helmets. Murray Dalinka, one of the “Young Bone Radiologists,” indicates that “Harry had more ski outfits than most ski shops. And you almost never saw him in the same suit more than once.” He loved gadgets, from iPhones to cameras to drones, always top of the line products, but also, as indicated again by his longtime friend and business partner, Charles Peterfy, “casting each aside as soon as the next upgrade came out.” And when it came to lecturing at our ski course, we were all competitive, trying to do our very best. Simply, we each motivated the others, providing the stimulus to help in our common purpose to be successful as academic musculoskeletal radiologists. And, the highlight of the annual meeting was a film panel, with two competing teams of radiologists trying to push the “buzzer” before the other team, first on non-radiology “culture” toss-up questions and then on difficult imaging cases. I believe that ours was the initial course at which this team approach was utilized, a teaching technique that is now employed by many conferences and organizations, such as the International Skeletal Society and the Davos imaging courses. As our 30s became our 40s, 50s, and beyond, we remained that support group, as close as ever. Of those seven “Young Bone Radiologists,” five including Harry served as President of the International Skeletal Society.

Harry is survived by his wife of 52 years, Gail; their children Laura, Jonathan, and Justin; his sister Judy Jaglin; and five grandchildren. Family was of utmost importance to him. Indeed, Harry was devoted to his family, including his beloved labradoodle Lucy, as well as to a group of close friends that stretched around the world. To his family and friends, his presence often lit up the room, illuminating his deep interest in the lives of those about him. One of his closest friends, Maxwell Drever, remarks Harry “showed genuine respect and care for not only each of us, but for all he touched—quite a gift from such a gifted person.” Each December, like clockwork, I and many others would receive a Holiday Card with a picture of the Genant clan featured prominently, the photo having been taken during the family’s recent trip somewhere in the USA or abroad. Often, the destination was a mountain range or national park, requiring vigorous hiking, skiing, or swimming or some other physical activity that the

entire family could experience together. Beyond his own family, Harry was also active in the Tiburon community, coaching his kids and others in soccer and serving as commissioner for the Tiburon Peninsula Soccer League (for which he was affectionately referred to as Dr. Soccer).

So, as I said at the beginning, I am so saddened by the news of Harry’s passing. To me, he seemed indestructible, always active, and fit, with endless child-like enthusiasm for everything. Unlike most people who, as they get older, spend more time looking back, reminiscing, Harry was always looking forward, wondering what opportunities were just ahead. Clearly, he will be remembered as an internationally respected musculoskeletal radiologist, a proven researcher with a long list of extraordinary accomplishments, and a uniquely gifted educator and role model to hundreds of scientists around the world. But also to me, his family, and many others, above all else, Harry will be remembered as a wonderful human being, charismatic and good-natured, innately optimistic and happy, with a clever sense of humor and boundless energy and passion. Harry was my friend, more than that, a close friend. I have had very few of such close friends, and even fewer now. They are hard to find. We all know that. I am fortunate to have known Harry. I will dearly miss him. Countless others will as well.

The Genant family has indicated that any donations to honor Harry could be made in his name to the American Stroke Association.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Written consent to publish this Obituary and the two photographs was obtained from Dr. Gail Genant. The author, Donald Resnick, M.D. has no conflict of interest to report.

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