


OBITUARY

In Memoriam: Goodwin M. Breinin, MD (1918-2011)

Goodwin M. Breinin, MD, passed away peacefully at his home on December 14, 2011, at the age of 93 years. He is best remembered as the Daniel B. Kirby Professor and Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology, New York University (NYU) Medical Center, from 1959 to 2000, serving for 41 years.

After receiving his medical degree from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr Breinin served in the Army for 2 years during World War II. Following residency at NYU, he became Professor of Research Ophthalmology there, specializing in clinical motility and neurophysiology of extraocular muscle. A world-renowned expert in ophthalmic electromyography, his classic monograph on the subject, published by the American Ophthalmological Society in 1960, was based on the research performed at his Bellevue laboratory. Among his feats was the insertion of a needle into his own medial rectus, monitoring its electrical patterns. Asked why he chose to study ocular motility, he mused that it was the most challenging of all the ocular subspecialties.

Dr Breinin’s mission was “bringing Helmholtz into ophthalmology” by integrating its clinical and basic science components. Under his aegis, world-class investigators produced landmark discoveries in muscle research, retinal physiology, and ophthalmic pathology. His own 129 publications include such pioneering subjects as the use of Diamox (acetazolamide) in treating glaucoma and corneal chelation for band keratopathy.

For these achievements, Goodwin Breinin received international recognition. He served on the Board of Directors of the American Board of Ophthalmology and was Chairman of the Ophthalmology section of the American Medical Association. Among his numerous lectureships and awards were the American Medical Association Knapp Medal for Contributions to Ophthalmology and the Emory Medal for lifetime achievement.

Dr Breinin was conversant with nearly every aspect of ophthalmology, a rarity in an era of superspecialization. He always concluded Grand Rounds with cogent comments on the topic of the day.

On the occasion of his retirement, Dr Breinin’s patients, friends, and faculty endowed a Visiting Professorship at NYU Medical Center. A similar program at Emory University has featured 4 Nobel laureates. In perpetuity, Goodwin Breinin’s legacy will, appropriately, be one of education.

Those who knew “Dud” Breinin experienced his wit, charm, erudition, and elegant verbiage, often peppered with Greek and Latin. A philosophy buff, he wrote several short stories that spoof Gnostic ideas. When he lost his hearing, Goodwin finished the daunting task of reading all the novels of Trollope, Elliot, Dickens, and Hardy. His illness did not rob him of his sense of humor. As he put it, “I have started chemo—which is an interesting experience, I am exchanging heated words with the Demiurge. Actually it’s one-way—he doesn’t choose to debate.”

During his final years, buffered by the love of his wife Rose-Helen, his children Bart and Constance, and his 4 multitalented grandchildren, he learned to cook. He remained active in his research laboratory, pursuing the effects of novel pharmacological agents on conductivity at the neuromuscular junction. Glancing at my own microscope, he remarked to me that “the answers are all there, staring you in the face.”

That was Goodwin. In the parlance of the theater, a hard act to follow.

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