In Memoriam: Bernard Becker (1920-2013)

Michael Kass, MD; Morton Smith, MD

Bernard Becker died on August 28, 2013, 1 week after his 93rd birthday. With his death, we have lost one of the giants of 20th century ophthalmology.

Dr Becker was born in 1920 in New York City and attended Princeton University on a full scholarship. While at Princeton, he supported himself by tutoring fellow students in chemistry and mathematics. He then received a full scholarship to attend Harvard Medical School, where he maintained his strong interest in chemistry. He then served in the US Army Medical Corps during World War II.

After the war, Dr Becker was interested in applying the techniques of histochemistry to medical research. He attended a scientific meeting where he was impressed with a presentation by Jonas Friedenwald, MD, who invited Becker to join his laboratory at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. After arriving at Johns Hopkins, Becker realized for the first time that Friedenwald was an ophthalmologist. Dr Friedenwald eventually convinced Becker to do his training in ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins University.

Shortly after completing residency, Dr Becker was recruited to be Chair of Ophthalmology at the Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis, a position he held for 35 years. Dr Becker took a small department with modest research capabilities and developed it into a true academic department with a national and an international reputation.

Dr Becker was one of the world leaders in the study of the pathogenesis and treatment of glaucoma. He was the prime developer of the drug acetazolamide and a proponent of its use for the treatment of glaucoma. He, along with Robert Schaffer, MD, created a textbook of glaucoma that is one of the classics of ophthalmic literature (ie, Becker-Shaffer’s Diagnosis and Therapy of the Glaucomas). In addition, Dr Becker showed an interest in a very wide range of diseases, including diabetes and thyroid disease. He also studied the physiology and biochemistry of the eye and published more than 400 articles on those subjects.

Dr Becker was active in national organizations related to vision research. He was one of the key figures who helped to nurture the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology so that it became the leading eye research organization in the world. He served as the first editor of the association’s journal, Investigative Ophthalmology (which is now known as Investigative Ophthalmology and Visual Science). Dr Becker was one of a small group of academics who recognized that federal funding for eye research was inadequate to meet the needs of investigators and patients. He and others in this group helped to convince political leaders, philanthropists, and medical leaders to create a separate National Eye Institute. Dr Becker was also one of the founders of the Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology. He received numerous awards during his career, including the Friedenwald Award, the Proctor Medal, the Helen Keller Award, and the Laureate Award of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Dr Becker was a quiet, shy man who avoided the limelight. Despite his quiet nature, he was able to convey his intense interest and excitement about science and medicine to his students. If a student had even a small spark of an idea, Dr Becker would help him or her develop the idea into a testable hypothesis. His students became leaders in the profession, with many becoming chairs of departments, editors of journals, and heads of learned societies.

Dr Becker had an encyclopedic knowledge of ophthalmology and medicine. He read approximately 100 medical journals each month. He knew the interests of every resident, student, fellow, and faculty member and would send articles to them on subjects that he thought they would find stimulating. All of this information was kept in his head, and he continued this practice until shortly before his death. Dr Becker, in typically modest fashion, often joked that the medical school library had been named for him because he had spent the most time reading there. He was also a collector of rare medical books and manuscripts and donated his collection to the Washington University Medical School Library (now known as the Bernard Becker Medical Library). Dr Becker was intensely interested in civil rights. He recruited women and minority students as fellows and faculty members when it was uncommon to do so in our profession. He and his wife Janet spent their time and used their financial resources in the aid of education, art, and medicine. They were especially interested in helping the
poor, the homeless, and the hungry. All of their charitable efforts were done quietly, and most were done anonymously.

Bernard Becker was a mentor, friend, and role model to generations of ophthalmologists. Those of us who were privileged to have the chance to work with him were profoundly changed by the experience. He will be greatly missed, and we were very fortunate to have him with us for so long.

Author Affiliation: Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, Missouri.

Corresponding Author: Michael Kass, MD, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Science, Washington University School of Medicine, 600 S Euclid Ave, PO Box 8096, St Louis, MO 63110 (Kass@vision.wustl.edu).

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OPHTHALMIC IMAGES

Delayed-Onset Inferior Rectus Muscle Hematoma After Orbital Floor Fracture

Bryan R. Costin, MD; Steven A. McNutt, MD; Natta Sakolsatayadorn, MD; Julian D. Perry, MD

A 75-year-old woman with a right-sided orbital floor fracture (detected on a computed tomographic scan [A]) reported sudden-onset diplopia 7 days after initial imaging. A second computed tomographic scan revealed a right-sided inferior rectus hematoma (B). Extraocular muscle hematoma should be considered with new-onset diplopia days after orbital trauma.