Jonathan Dine Wirtschafter, MD (1935-2004)

Dr Jonathan Dine Wirtschafter, professor of ophthalmology, neurology, and neurosurgery at the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis) died on August 9, 2004, at the age of 69 owing to complications of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Dr Wirtschafter was known for his great ability to balance his passion for neuro-ophthalmology and his love of friends and family.

Dr Wirtschafter grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and graduated from Reed College, Portland, Ore, in 1956. He attended Harvard Medical School, Boston, Mass, where he received his MD degree in 1960 and this was followed by a master’s degree in physiology from Linfield College, McMinnville, Ore, in 1963. He then completed residencies in neurology at Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland in 1963, followed by an ophthalmology residency at the Wilmer Eye Institute, Baltimore, Md, in 1966. This was followed by a fellowship at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. He was board certified in both ophthalmology and neurology.

Following his residencies and fellowship, Dr Wirtschafter was recruited to start a residency training program in ophthalmology and serve as the first chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Kentucky, Louisville. There he was known for his stewardship of the department and for his dedication to bringing quality eye care to all areas of Kentucky.

In 1977, Dr Wirtschafter joined the faculty at the University of Minnesota’s Department of Ophthalmology, where he held the Frank E. Burch Chair. Dr Wirtschafter became an early pioneer in the treatment of patients with facial spasm disorders. He participated in the early trials of botulinum toxin injections and subsequently developed the use of the chemotherapy drug doxorubicin hydrochloride as a chemomyectomy agent. His range of research interests varied from the mathematical formula for astigmatism caused by pterygia to the pathophysiology of papilledema. Later in his career he became interested in diseases of muscle and worked tirelessly up until his death with his long-time collaborative research partner, Linda McLoon, PhD, to define the role of muscle satellite cells.

Dr Wirtschafter was the first president of the Benign Essential Blepharospasm Research Foundation. He was involved in the beginning of the North American Neuro-Ophthalmology Society and served as its president from 1996 through 1998. He will be remembered for his ability to encourage broader participation in this society, particularly for women neuro-ophtalmologists. He was also active in the establishment of standards for fellowship training in neuro-ophthalmology.

Dr Wirtschafter was a passionate teacher of medical students, residents, and fellows. On 4 separate occasions, he received the Resident’s Award for Best Teacher of the year. Many of his publications were coauthored by his students, who were inspired to become involved in research owing to his infectious enthusiasm. Many students will remember his long clinics lasting until 8 o’clock at night or later while Dr Wirtschafter reviewed patients’ medical histories and discussed the latest journal articles. In honor of his great commitment to teaching, a lectureship has been established in his honor at the University of Minnesota.

Not only was Dr Wirtschafter a great clinician, teacher, and researcher, he was an extraordinary human being. He had an incredible appetite for the world and all of its beauty. He enjoyed all of the connections and puzzles to be solved both within neuro-ophthalmology and in the world at large. He was a great friend to many, a marvelous listener, and truly interested in our professional and nonprofessional lives.

One of my greatest honors was to be able to study under Jonathan as a resident and fellow and join him as a colleague. However, what I will remember most was the tremendous dignity, elegance, and even humor he showed when faced with a most difficult disease that took him from us far too prematurely. Jonathan will be dearly missed by his wife and inspiration of 44 years, Carol, his 5 remarkable children, Joshua, Jacob, Benjamin, David, and Brooke, their partners, his 10 grandchildren, and all of his friends and colleagues.

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