OBITUARY

When Winston Churchill was once asked to say something nice about a colleague, he replied that he was a modest man with a lot to be modest about. Rufus Howard, MD, was a modest man, but he had nothing to be modest about. He grew up in his birthplace of Knoxville, Tennessee, and in Portsmouth, Virginia, before attending college at William and Mary and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Winner of spelling bees as a child, he first got a PhD in physical chemistry from Massachusetts Institute of Technology before deciding to go to medical school.

Dr Howard was the first Yale University ophthalmology resident under the chairmanship of Dr Marvin L. Sears. His residency was followed by an appointment and later a position as a clinical professor there. He was a gentle soul and a natural teacher. He was particularly interested in ophthalmic genetics, publishing more than 80 articles, many dealing with eye findings in various diseases, including trisomy 21, Werner syndrome, retinoblastoma, Leigh disease, and optic nerve aplasia. He also enjoyed being a member of the American Ophthalmological Society.

I had the privilege of knowing Rufus Howard first as a teacher and then as a colleague. I am sure I tested his patience when I did my first operation. He was always supportive, kind, and extraordinary helpful and reassuring. I particularly remember spending time with him in the Genetics Clinic at Yale. Because of him, Yale residents saw many patients with fascinating eye findings, including Wilson disease, the mucopolysaccharidoses, Marfan syndrome, and homocystinuria.

He was scholarly and had a wonderful sense of humor. He and his wife of 52 years, Martha, raised 7 children, 4 of them during medical school. They also have 10 grandchildren. One daughter, Martha Howard, who was also trained at Yale, is now a pediatric ophthalmologist in Connecticut. I had the privilege of having her as my student and felt the pleasure of teaching from one generation to the next.

He told his children “to whom much is given, much is expected,” and this exemplified his mission approach to medicine. For more than 30 years, he provided eye care to mentally handicapped children in Southbury, Connecticut. He also enjoyed working at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital, a Yale-affiliated hospital in Haiti, bringing his family with him. He loved sharing music, travel, hiking, outdoor activities, and his delicious baked desserts with his family. At his funeral, his 9-year-old granddaughter played the second movement from Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 3, a moving and wonderful tribute to this exceptional person. We will miss him.

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