

Education in Professionalism: Leonard Berlin, MD

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2015

For none alive today
Can know the stories that we know
Or say the things we say
--William Butler Yeats

Among the most important resources for learning and teaching professionalism are professionals themselves. It is well and good to extoll the virtues of professionalism in the abstract, but such traits really come to life only through the stories of the people who have lived them. Of special interest is how an understanding and commitment to professionalism develop over the course of a career.

One exemplar who has done more than most to advance professionalism is Leonard Berlin, MD. Berlin is widely recognized as radiology's greatest authority on the interface between medicine and the law, and in particular, medical malpractice. But underlying this interest in medicolegal matters is Berlin's deep interest and dedication to professionalism.

Professionalism is not a set of ideas or habits that can be simply bolted on to a physician in an instant. Instead, professionalism represents a natural expression of a personal identity and aspirations that have developed over the course of a lifetime. To understand how Berlin's commitment to professionalism grew and developed over time, we must begin with his biography.

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Gunderman, R. B. (2015). Education in Professionalism: Leonard Berlin, MD. *Academic Radiology*, 22(6), 802–804. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.acra.2015.01.017>

Berlin was born in Chicago in 1935, the son of lower-middle-class parents. His father had emigrated from Latvia as a teenager, and his mother was an American. Though his mother had graduated from high school, his father had no formal education. His father operated an independent grocery store very near Wrigley field.

As a child, Berlin worked in his father's store, and he remembers something he learned there. On Sundays, after the local church service ended, people would stop by the store to shop. His father, the sole proprietor, would often have three or four customers lined up. When new ones entered, they would see the line and turn around. But Berlin's father would always summon them back. "Please do not leave," he would say, "I will take care of you."

Soon Berlin got another job at a local pharmacy. He was the delivery boy and was paid 30 cents/hour. "To me, a tip of 10 cents was huge." One day, the pharmacist asked him what career he was planning on. He said, "I want to be a pharmacist." The man responded, "Don't be a pharmacist. You should go in through the front door. Become a doctor."

So Berlin worked hard in school and applied to college. He was accepted at two Chicago universities, but tuition at Northwestern University was \$2000 per year, whereas University of Illinois was only \$100 per semester. So he went to University of Illinois, where he joined many former servicemen studying on the school's Navy Pier campus.

It was during his 3 years of premedical studies that he met and married his wife of 58 years and the mother of his four sons, Phyllis.

After graduation, he entered the Medical School of University of Illinois. A neighbor had a business selling cameras that could make miniature copies of X-ray films, and he knew the radiology department at

the school needed someone who could operate their camera. On his recommendation, Berlin applied and got the job.

At the time, residents on call at the hospital were required to take and develop radiographs. Bowing to their requests, the chair of the department decided to hire night and weekend technologists. Knowing that Berlin was a medical student, he asked if he would like such a job. Berlin eagerly accepted, and soon he was working every third night and weekend as an X-ray tech.

Berlin became well known in the radiology department, and he was offered a residency spot there. However, he needed to find an internship. He settled on St. Francis hospital, where he was paid \$250 per month. By this time, Phyllis also had a job, teaching high school math. During his internship, he had the opportunity to deliver approximately 100 babies.

In the early 1960s, radiology residency required 3 years: 2 diagnostic and 1 therapeutic. At the time Berlin was completing his training, the war in Vietnam was ramping up. Faced with the choice between waiting to be drafted or volunteering for a 2-year commitment, he chose to volunteer and ended up spending 2 years at Wright-Patterson Air Force base in Dayton, OH.

He returned to Chicago in 1965, working part-time with several radiology practices around the city, while also serving as a part-time faculty member at the University of Illinois. In 1966, a radiologist told him that a new hospital had opened in Skokie and invited him to join him in practice there. Berlin accepted. Eventually, the founding radiologist left the practice, and Berlin became its chairman.

In about 1980, the hospital wanted to get a computed tomography (CT) scanner, but the state had declared a moratorium on certificates of need. However, this restriction did not apply to private practice groups. So

Berlin and colleagues negotiated with the hospital CEO, who agreed to lease them space, and the radiologists purchased the CT scanner, a model then manufactured by Pfizer.

Pfizer's radiology business was eventually purchased by Elscint. Before long, the North American president of Elscint offered Berlin's group the opportunity to obtain the company's first magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner in the United States and only the third MRI scanner to be installed in Chicago, which they eagerly accepted.

In 2008, the year the hospital was acquired by a large health system, Berlin retired from the practice of clinical radiology. Long before that, however, he had developed a keen interest in the intersection between medicine and the law.

This interest stemmed from an event that transpired in 1975. One day, when performing his daily clinical work, he was interrupted by a radiology department staff member who told him that a patient in the waiting room wanted to see him.

Entering the waiting room, he recognized a neighbor, who told him that she had injured her hand playing tennis. Berlin could see what a radiograph soon confirmed, namely, that she had a dislocation at the distal interphalangeal joint of her fifth digit. She was referred to an orthopedic surgeon, who reduced and splinted the digit. A follow-up radiograph several weeks later showed a tiny chip fracture, not visible on the first image.

Berlin heard nothing about it until 6 months later, when he learned that the patient had filed a lawsuit against him. She claimed that his failure to detect the fracture had resulted in a permanent loss of function in her hand. Berlin thought it was “the most ridiculous thing in the world,” and the orthopedic surgeon agreed.

However, Berlin's colleague suggested that he show the radiographs to one of the top hand surgeons in town. The hand surgeon confirmed both that the fracture was not visible on the initial radiograph and that the miss had not resulted in any harm to the patient. In fact, the patient had been recently visited the hand surgeon, and he had written her a letter to this effect.

Berlin asked for a copy of the letter, which the hand surgeon provided. Furious, he decided to countersue. An acquaintance offered to help prepare the case but suggested Berlin should represent himself. A colleague on the hospital board who wrote a daily column for one of the Chicago newspapers learned of the case and decided to publish an article on it.

As the case attracted more and more attention, the plaintiff petitioned the judge to dismiss it. The judge not only refused but insisted that both the suit and countersuit should be heard simultaneously and by the same jury. The case was tried for 3 days around Memorial Day weekend in 1976, and at the conclusion, the jury found in favor of Berlin.

At this point, Berlin became something of a celebrity. The case was reported by all the local newspapers and television stations, as well as such national media outlets as Time and Newsweek. Several years later, the verdict was reversed on appeal but not before Berlin had made his point. In retrospect, Berlin is magnanimous in admitting that the reversal was a good thing because such countersuits could have a chilling effect on the ability of ordinary people to seek legal redress for grievances.

Realizing that most radiologists knew little about the relationship between radiology and the law, Berlin started writing articles for radiology journals, the first of which was published in 1977. Lee Rogers, chair at Northwestern and editor of the American Journal of Roentgenology, asked Berlin to start writing regularly for the journal on medicolegal matters.

For one 7-year stretch between 1996 and 2003, Berlin had an article in every monthly issue of the journal, and he has been writing on these topics ever since. His interest in this area had led not only to many publications but to a variety of speaking engagements and service opportunities with professional organizations.

More recently, Berlin worked with the American Roentgen Ray Society to endow a professionalism award, which encourages radiologists to undertake research and scholarship in ethics. He did so partly out of a sense that he should give back to a profession that has been very good to him, and partly with the intention of enhancing ethics and professionalism in the field.

Having been in radiology for over 50 years, Berlin has seen a number of changes, both technologically and professionally. Most have been for the better, but there have also been downsides, such as the rise of teleradiology, which has increasingly isolated today's radiologists from referring physicians. Berlin fondly recalls a day when radiologists and referring physicians interacted regularly, learned a lot from one another, and built strong relationships.

Despite some worrisome changes, however, Berlin believes that the future of radiology is as bright as it has ever been. Radiologists will remain the “doctor's doctor.” To secure this future, however, Berlin believes that radiologists need to continue to promote professionalism and put patients first.

Ultimately, Berlin continues to navigate by some basic lessons he learned a long time ago. One was the lesson of his father's grocery store. An independent businessman, he never wanted a customer to leave unserved or unhappy, and Berlin has tried to bring that same spirit to the practice of radiology.

He recalls staying an extra day at a hotel in San Francisco at the conclusion of a radiology meeting and requesting the convention rate for the day. Although the desk attendant eventually agreed, she did so in a resentful and sullen fashion, leaving her customer angry. Such experiences remind Berlin to stay focused on being helpful and striving to create a positive impression.

Berlin also recalls the day he purchased a new suit for his eldest son's Bar Mitzvah. He told the tailor that because he was paying so much for it, he wanted it to be perfect. The tailor replied, "The only time it will fit perfectly is when you wear it in the coffin." From this, Berlin learned the danger of insisting on perfection, which has helped him to be more forgiving of himself and others.

When Berlin looks back over the long expanse of his career, he finds greatest satisfaction in the things he has written. It means a lot to him when people he has never met approach him at meetings and tell him how helpful they found one of his articles. This, says Berlin, is the essence of professionalism: the sincere commitment to serving others.

Berlin's is not the only story of professionalism. Such accounts necessarily differ to greater and lesser degrees from one professional to another. However, it is a very good story, one that helps us see the crucial interplay between family and work, adversity and opportunity, and earning a living and making a contribution. As such, it offers insightful lessons on where professionalism comes from.