We Are All Mentors

Members of the Society for Investigative Dermatology and the European Society for Dermatological Research may remember that in September and October 2010 I conducted an ad hoc Internet-based survey that invited members to identify up to three mentors who had contributed substantially to their careers. Because the questionnaire was available to all members, young and old, in both societies, a wide spectrum of mentors, also with variations in age and interest, was identified. My purpose was to provide members with information about how mentorship currently takes place in our collective disciplines.

The survey asked members to identify as many as three individuals who were most helpful to them during the growth of their careers (I was mindful of the fact that mentorship is complicated, with variations from mentee to mentee). So, what did I learn? In response to an e-mail request (and one subsequent reminder), 290 members of the two societies completed the task. This represents 10–15% of the membership and about 50% of the number of members who attend the Annual Meeting each year. This rather anemic response rate is not sufficient to reach statistical significance concerning our members, although members who had more memorable mentors would be more likely to respond. Nevertheless, the responses are sufficient to allow some useful conclusions about some of our mentors, and these are outlined below.

Who are the mentors?

Respondents listed up to three mentors of significance, meaning that as many as 870 names might have been submitted. I anticipated that some, if not many, mentors would be named more than once, and I thought that no more than 100 to 200 would be identified, especially because many respondents listed only one or two. To my surprise, the 290 respondents identified 575 different mentors as having been significant in the development of their careers. These mentors of significance included Nobel Prize recipients, departmental chairs, members of the National Academy of Sciences (USA), young investigators, and a great number of investigators in fields far removed from conventional departments of dermatology. Many mentees crossed one or more oceans for their experience. (As an aside, the questionnaire did not go to members of the Japanese Society for Investigative Dermatology, meaning that only individuals who hold joint membership were surveyed. However, Japanese investigators were also cited as both mentors and mentees.)

It was instructive to examine the cited mentors who represent the historical development of cutaneous science. Some of the more notable were Egon Macher, Aaron Lerner, Rudolf Baer, D. Martin Carter, Rudy Cormane, Jean Thivolet, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and Irwin Freedberg. They were all mentors, and so are we.

Some individuals stand out for special recognition

Thirty-seven members of the JID Editorial Board were identified at least once. Perhaps more importantly, 53 mentors were identified by three or more respondents and 14 by five or more. Yes, we may conclude that there are “hot spots” or “hot laboratories” for effective mentorship. I was a little concerned about naming the individuals who were cited most frequently until I read the names; they will arouse little controversy because they all have previously recognized records of scholarship and mentorship. Receiving six or more acknowledgments were Stephen Katz (NIAMS, NIH), Jouni Utto (Thomas Jefferson University), Thomas Fitzpatrick (deceased, Harvard University), John Voorhees (University of Michigan), Georg Stingl (Medical University of Vienna), and Arthur Eisen (Washington University). It should be noted, however, that two features characterize these individuals: (i) they all have headed relatively large and highly recognized research units (divisions, departments, branches) and (ii) they all have had research careers spanning more than 30 years. Not far behind in the frequency distribution is a much larger cadre of highly effective individuals who currently head laboratories around the world. We can predict that this next generation of mentors will establish an even more impressive record.
Comments made by the respondents were numerous and enlightening, and several merit repeating

• “...guidance about the big picture and how to solve little problems”

• “...taught me how to ask scientific questions and how to write, through countless hours of advice”

• “...open-door policy allowed me flexibility to grow and learn in my project”

• “...how to organize time and write grants”

• “...showed me how to present data and give presentations”

• “...optimism”

• “...teaching that there’s more than one way to look at things”

• “...I was given time to listen and talk.”

In sum, members of our societies have benefited enormously from the time and skills of a great number of mentors; in fact, we are all mentors. My hope is that we are able to improve our skills through intentional study and practice in order to facilitate the growth of cutaneous science.

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