Harvey Blank, 1918–2001

Harvey Blank, a champion of academic dermatology in the second half of the twentieth century, died on October 5, 2001 after a prolonged illness (Figure 1). For more than 30 years Harvey served as mentor and role model for countless leaders in dermatology across the nation. His impact included important clinical and basic science observations, a commitment to critical thinking and objectivity, and a willingness to allow trainees and junior faculty to seek their own goals. This legacy of support, example, and inspiration will carry far into the twenty-first century. Likewise, his support of the Society for Investigative Dermatology was unfailing. During 35 years of membership, he received its highest honor, the Stephen Rothman Memorial Award, and he served effectively in many offices, including the Board of Directors and the Presidency.

Harvey Blank's interest in dermatology developed as a medical student at the University of Chicago, where Samuel Becker, Sr., Maximilian Obermeyer, and Stephen Rothman served as role models. This interest led him to become chief of dermatology for a large field hospital in India during World War II. Confronted with overwhelming numbers of casualties from skin disease, he rapidly became the dermatologist, even though he had, as yet, no formal training. His knowledge of dermatology resulted from intensive reading and experimentation. Not only did these traits of reading and experimentation come to typify Harvey's career, they have been transferred explicitly to many trainees. In the army he met Clarence Livingood, who suggested that he take formal training in dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania. Ultimately his military activities resulted in serving as the Director of the Armed Forces Epidemiological Board, where he was able to help target support for dermatologic diseases throughout the United States.

Taking Livingood's advice, Harvey trained under Donald Pillsbury at the University of Pennsylvania, where he developed a special interest in virology. Combined with his interest in electron microscopy, he produced the first micrographic proof that the varicella and zoster viruses were morphologically identical. After leaving the University, he entered industry to work at E.R. Squibb & Sons Inc., in New Brunswick, NJ, where he played an important role in developing agents such as topical nystatin and the first halogenated steroid ointment.

Ultimately, academia was his preference, and in 1956 Harvey was recruited to found the Department of Dermatology at the fledgling University of Miami School of Medicine. Shortly thereafter, he discovered griseofulvin, the first, and for many years the only, oral therapy for dermatophyte infections. Harvey's contributions grew over time to include the description, with Imrich Sarkany and David Taplin, of the etiologic agent of erythrasma; editorialship of the Archives of Dermatology, where he pioneered development of a peer review system; and chairmanship of the Special Food and Drug Administration Committee that reviewed antimicrobial agents. Harvey's importance to dermatology and the respect he generated for our specialty were documented by his becoming one of the first dermatologists elected to membership in the Association of American Physicians.

Harvey's most important contribution to the science of dermatology was in teaching his trainees and colleagues how to think. Illustrative of this is the logo and motto developed for the festschrift held in his honor in 1988 (Arch Dermatol 125: 209, 1989). It depicted a body diagram, half clear and half shaded, with the Latin phrase, 'He taught us to think and to compare.' All those who knew Harvey understand this motto and his insistence on bilateral comparisons in topical therapy. Similarly emblematic of Harvey's impact was the engraving given to him by Dr Phil Catalano upon his retirement. The first line read 'Harvey Blank, M.D.' and the second line, directly below, read 'Harvey Blank, M.D.' 'Given by Phil on his departure from the department.' It forcefully acknowledged that student's association of Harvey with the concept of reproducibility. That this plaque remained on Harvey's desk for many years reflects, we believe, the importance Harvey placed on, and the pleasure he took in, transmitting this message.

In the laboratory and in the clinic, Harvey Blank's creativity could be found in his ability to separate epiphenomena from the relevant, and trivial from the substantive, and to go directly to the heart of the problem. He rapidly identified hazy, cluttered, and uncritical thinking and worked hard to help clarify, correct, improve, and solve the issue at hand. He repeatedly impressed observers with his ability to heal patients with simple treatments. For those students maturing under his watchful eye, virtually any treatment was acceptable provided that proper controls and patient safety were observed. In fact, he encouraged trainees to apply the highest scientific and ethical standards to the practice of dermatology. His students were taught to approach the diagnosis and treatment of each patient in the same critical manner as we would any scientific endeavor. He always felt that he magnified his ability to help patients by training physicians who went into clinical practice. Further evidence of his commitment to practice, and to the practitioner of dermatology, was his view that there could not be a 'bad' teacher on his volunteer faculty. He knew that the concept of teacher and student was a pretense. Both were teachers and learners and both teacher and resident became better physicians through their interaction in treating patients. In his department, the student, intern, or first-year resident who brought forth new information became the teacher.

Harvey trained 133 dermatology residents while at the University of Miami. In addition, more than 50 fellows and junior

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faculty served and were influenced by him. More than a dozen of his trainees and junior faculty became department chairs, while many more served on teaching faculties. Many of these individuals have held important responsibilities in our Society.

Harvey received many awards and honors including: membership in Alpha Omega Alpha; the Society for Investigative Dermatology’s Stephen Rothman Memorial Award; the Armed Forces’ Distinguished Civilian Award; honorary membership, the Gold Award, and the Masters in Dermatology Award from the American Academy of Dermatology; and Practitioner of the Year Award from the Florida Society of Dermatology. In addition, at the time of his retirement the Harvey Blank Chair in Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery was established, as was the Harvey Blank Room at the University of Miami Medical School Library, where much of his memorabilia are preserved.

After retiring in 1988, Harvey’s physical activities slowed because of illness. On the other hand, his curiosity did not abate, either in studying his own illness or in trying to develop new topical therapies. During these years he received constant encouragement and support from his wife of 26 years, Joan Gill Blank.

In addition to Joan, Harvey is survived by two daughters, three stepchildren and two grandchildren.

It is easy to assume that the status of dermatology has always been high, as it is now, but this is not the case. Rather, people like Harvey Blank have allowed our specialty to attain its new recognition as a scientifically based discipline critically important to both medicine and surgery. The respect of our medical colleagues and of the public for dermatologists comes, in part, as a consequence of Harvey Blank’s immeasurable contributions. We will miss him.

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