Melvin A. Block, MD

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Melvin Block had a great effect on Henry Ford Hospital during his 25 years of service (1954 to 1979). Invariably gentlemanly and nonconfrontational, Mel’s approach was that of a knowledgeable and experienced counselor. Assembling facts, weighing options, and suggesting alternate courses of action characterized his approach. In an arena of strong personalities at Ford Hospital, Mel might have seemed overwhelmed to the casual observer, yet the initiated recognized that his quiet, imperturbable demeanor and intuitive grasp of a situation usually allowed his view to prevail.

Certainly part of his success emanated from his quiet and sensible upbringing in Evansville, Indiana, where he was born in 1921. He attended Indiana University and graduated in 1942 with a Bachelor of Science degree before matriculating at the Indiana University School of Medicine. He distinguished himself by being elected to Alpha Omega Alpha and receiving his MD degree after only 2 1/2 years of study. His internship was served at the affiliated hospitals of the Indiana University School of Medicine in 1945.

Dr. Block entered the Armed Forces in 1945 as a Captain in the United States Army where he served through 1947 with most of his time spent on the Manhattan Engineering Project. He served as a member of the original Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission and was responsible for initiating investigations about the medical effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Ultimately, he was able to establish the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in both Hiroshima and Kure and obtained funding for prolonged study of the medical consequences of the bombings.

Dr. Block left the Army in 1948 and entered the Surgical Residency Training Program at the Mayo Clinic. As part of the program, two years were spent in physiology and experimental surgery where he concentrated on the kidney and its pathophysiology. Successful completion of the residency also resulted in his receiving a Doctor of Philosophy in Surgery degree from the University of Minnesota in 1953, and he was certified by the American Board of Surgery in 1954.

Mel traveled to Detroit to join the staff of Henry Ford Hospital in 1954. His quiet yet productive style allowed him to advance to the position of Division Chief by 1957. During this golden era, surgeons had complete training in all aspects of surgery, which, as such, encompassed a broad approach to surgical therapeutics.

In the days before the Department of Surgery had developed divisions such as biliary surgery, endocrine surgery, oncologic surgery, and vascular surgery, Mel was recognized for contributions in all of these areas—a true Renaissance man. He was recognized by his colleagues as a master at incisively dividing a complex clinical problem into logical parts and then prioritizing the individual parts into a simple and usually successful therapeutic plan.

Even though a believer and a practitioner of the broad field of surgery, Mel developed an increasing interest in thyroid and parathyroid surgery. This was an active clinical arena at Ford Hospital prior to his arrival from the Mayo Clinic, with Drs. Robert Horn and Richmond Smith, respective Chairmen of the Departments of Pathology and Medicine, and Dr. Raymond Mellinger of the Division of Endocrinology and Dr. Brock Brush of the Department of Surgery having reputations for work in this area. Dr. J. Martin Miller, who had also trained at the Mayo Clinic, joined Ford’s staff at about the same time as Mel, and slowly they raised the science of thyroidology to an art form. In this setting Mel’s interest flourished. Surgeon, endocrinologist, and pathologist worked closely to advance the body of what was to become a major part of the field of endocrine surgery. This endeavor provided the intellectual and technical exercise which has proven enjoyable for so many years. Also during this period Mel collaborated with the late Dr. Boy Frame on patients with parathyroid disorders and with Dr. C.E. (Gene) Jackson on patients afflicted with the hereditary multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2 syndrome. Contributions to the understanding of these and other endocrine disorders flourished. The role of surgery was explored and documented. Mel wrote almost 200 papers during this period and was recognized by membership in the most respected surgical societies such as the American Surgical Association, the Central Surgical Association, the American Thyroid Association, the Western Surgical Association, the International Association of Endocrine Surgeons, and the Societe Internationale de Chirurgie. He was also elected to the Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract, the Society of Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons, and the Southeastern Surgical Congress. In 1990 he was elected to the Council for the American College of Surgeons.

Dr. Block was a practicing surgeon until 1990, when he retired. He was a true gentleman and a very kind soul who will be missed by many.
Society of Head and Neck Surgeons, and the American Gastroenterological Association. He has served as president of the Southeastern Michigan Surgical Society, the Academy of Surgery of Detroit, and most recently the Western Surgical Association. In addition, Dr. Block is one of the charter members and Council members of the American Association of Endocrine Surgeons.

At Ford Hospital, Mel's abilities were further recognized as he was named Chairman of the Department of Surgery and served as a member of both the Council of Henry Ford Hospital and of the Executive Committee of the Council. As part of his duties, he served on several institutional committees and subcommittees which not only administered the Hospital but also plotted its future course. Of paramount importance was the Hospital's development of a regional satellite structure which would help provide a patient population base to support a tertiary care center. In addition, prepayment programs were seen as an emerging, increasingly popular initiative to provide quality care at competitive costs. While understanding and supporting the institutional commitment to this form of health care delivery, Mel was able to mobilize the Department of Surgery to continue the traditions of clinical excellence and resident education while incorporating the philosophy of cost-containment into the everyday activities of the surgical practitioners. Long hours were spent in these and other endeavors. Mel frequently returned to the hospital after dinner and continued to work until midnight or 1 AM. Even then he would make rounds each morning before the patients were seen by his surgical residents. One particularly persistent resident had to round at 5 AM before Mel would relinquish his practice of seeing the patients first.

This vision and work ethic did not go unnoticed. Other awards, such as being named a Governor of the American College of Surgeons, followed. Mel was also approached several times about leaving Ford Hospital. The Scripps Clinic was especially persistent in their offer. Finally in 1979 Mel reflected on his accomplishments. The Department of Surgery was stronger than ever. The clinical volume was tremendous. Research productivity had increased significantly. The surgical residency training program had been strengthened. The Hospital was in the vanguard of protecting its important patient base and adopting innovative techniques to improve its financial situation. His children were raised. It was time to do something for his wife, Marcia, who supported him during his 25 years at Ford Hospital. No family remained in Detroit, and Marcia had relatives in California. It was time for the next chapter. Although Ford Hospital was to lose its respected Chief of Surgery to the Scripps Clinic, part of him remains to this day in the strong and vigorous Department of Surgery and in the tradition of excellence of Henry Ford Hospital. Part of him remains in the ongoing Endocrine Surgery clinical research and in the many close and personal friendships established over the years. Indeed, Mel Block will be with Ford Hospital for a long, long time.