



IN MEMORIAM

Henry Orson Wheeler
Professor Emeritus of Medicine
UC San Diego
1924 - 2001

Henry O. Wheeler, M.D., a founding member of the UCSD School of Medicine faculty, died October 12, 2001 after a brief illness. He was 77. He is remembered by his colleagues as a kind and gentle man who made pivotal contributions in setting the medical school on its path to renown. His personal qualities, and in particular his statesmanship, enthusiasm, dedication to patient care and to his colleagues, quietly accomplished much in the medical school's formative years and beyond. An accomplished physiologist as well as physician, he is perhaps equally remembered for his passion for photography – many of his images grace campus sites, including the medical centers in Hillcrest and La Jolla.

Henry was a native Californian who was born in Los Angeles in 1924. At the age of 17, he began his undergraduate education at Cal Tech, although this was to be interrupted by the Second World War and service in the U.S. Army Air Force as a Weather Officer. After the war, he returned to California for additional undergraduate study, before matriculating at Harvard in 1947 for his medical training. Clearly, he enjoyed the East Coast because he went on to complete his residency and fellowship training in Internal Medicine at Columbia University, following which he was appointed to the faculty at Columbia as Instructor of Medicine, in 1956. He rose rapidly up the academic ladder at Columbia, attaining the rank of Professor of Medicine by 1967. One year later, he was recruited by Eugene Braunwald to return to his Californian roots and join the grand experiment of the new medical school at UCSD, as founding Chief of the Division of Gastroenterology. He laid the foundations for a Division that would focus not only on superb patient care, but also on the science of digestive diseases, a concentration that continues to the present day.

Henry's research interests lay in the area of liver physiology and pathophysiology, particularly as related to the function of the gallbladder and the pathogenesis of gallstones. As a research fellow at Columbia, he began studies of the splanchnic circulation and the transport of specific solutes into bile, even dabbling occasionally in renal physiology where he published observations on the relationships between the structure and function of specific populations of nephrons. However, in 1961-62, he received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and Fulbright Scholarship to spend a sabbatical period in the laboratory of Hans Ussing, at the University of Copenhagen. Ussing is known to physiologists worldwide as the originator of the "Ussing chamber", an apparatus in which the active transport of ions and other solutes across epithelial tissues can be studied. Henry was quick to see the potential of this system to answer fundamental questions in biliary physiology, and upon returning to the United States, he rapidly set about applying it to study of the mammalian gallbladder. In a series of elegant papers, he elucidated the transport mechanisms that underlie the ability of the gallbladder to concentrate bile in the period between meals. These studies from the 1960s and 70s are probably his best-known work, and established a model of gallbladder function that remains the basis of our teaching to this day. Henry was likewise revered in academic gastroenterology circles for his insightful reviews on gallstone formation, and for his ability to identify and analyze clinically-relevant scientific questions through service on numerous review panels and advisory and editorial boards.

Henry perceived the major need, in this new research-based School of Medicine, for a model program in patient care. So, in 1979, having solidly established the fortunes of the Division of Gastroenterology, he

relinquished its leadership to an outstanding recruit from UCLA, Jon Isenberg, in order to take the helm of a newly- established Division of General Internal Medicine. His astute clinical skills served him well in this new challenge, as did his abiding focus on academic strengths. He established a strong teaching focus for the new division as well as nurturing both clinical and research interests in geriatrics. When he retired from the Division in 1988, becoming Professor Emeritus of Medicine, he was honored by his colleagues with “Henry Wheeler Day”, a day- long program of invited lectures by prominent speakers, including Jared Diamond from UCLA. But even after retirement, Henry remained an abiding presence in the Department of Medicine and in the two Divisions he had founded. He was sought out for his wise counsel, especially by young members of the faculty who greatly valued his sense of fairness and caring. He is also remembered by those who held positions of leadership in the Department of Medicine for his selfless devotion to University service, seeking neither recognition nor acknowledgment for the many tasks needed to establish a new medical school. In characteristic style, he just set about doing what needed to be done with grace and skill.

Along with his much- loved wife of 54 years, Isabel, Henry was also a tireless world traveler. He captured his delight in the places they visited by preserving their essence in an endless stream of beautiful photographs. His images have appeared in several scientific and medical publications and have also been exhibited at the UCSD Faculty Club on several occasions. Colleagues described him as both a master craftsman as well as being endowed with an artist’s eye. As befit a man recognized universally for his essential humanity, Henry’s photographs frequently reflected the human condition, even when on the surface they portrayed an exquisite or colorful landscape. In a similar vein, he is known for his sensitive portraiture. His sincere love of people began first with his family, including not only Isabel, but his daughters Mary and Charlotte, his sister Katharine, and five nieces and nephews.

Henry lived a good life, and will long be remembered by his friends and colleagues as a true gentleman. He had kind and caring ways towards all he came into contact with, be they patients, a nervous new faculty member, or a shy medical student. He made seminal contributions not only to medical science, but also to the development of a young and growing medical school. He is greatly missed.

Kim E. Barrett