



IN MEMORIAM

John Harvey Karam
Professor of Endocrinology and Metabolism
San Francisco
1929 — 2002

John Karam was a unique and rare individual who was beloved, admired and respected by his immediate and extended family, his clinical fellows, research collaborators, patients and the less fortunate whose lives he enhanced. His continuous commitment to improve access for quality medical care in the US and abroad made him an important international clinical figure. He was an active member of "Doctors without Borders" and "Flying Doctors," a northern California volunteer group that provides medical and dental care to Mexican villages. He provided free medical care to the uninsured and to illegal immigrants in the Mission District, volunteering at the Cinco de Mayo health fairs. Never arrogant or egotistical, John's mission was to establish the humanitarian side of "medical truth." To his students, he provided a comfortable "no shame in not knowing" learning environment. His combination of eclectic and critical knowledge of the scientific literature, plus a vast clinical experience, made John the gentle expert to whom his colleagues always turned to for their final guidance. John's mild demeanor camouflaged a lively humor and an enthusiasm for baseball, basketball, the latest books, movies and corner restaurants.

John Karam was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, to Lebanese parents who had formerly been pioneering settlers in the Arizona Territory. His mother was diabetic, a fact which stimulated his interest in medicine. After graduating high school at age 15, he obtained a degree in chemistry from St Louis University (where he initiated a life-time love of the St. Louis Cardinals) and received his M.D. from Tulane University Medical College in 1953. A residency at the Bronx VA was followed by house-staff training at the Philadelphia General Hospital and at Mount Sinai in New York. Subsequently, Dr. Karam was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of London Hammersmith Hospital and, from 1965 to 1967, a Fulbright Professor in Iraq. In 1968, John permanently joined the faculty at UCSF where he served as associate director of the Metabolic Unit, as chief of the Diabetes Clinic, and as director of the Dorothy Frank Diabetes Fellowship Training Program. He was a visiting professor or invited lecturer in many developing countries, including China, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Lebanon, Venezuela and Peru.

John Karam as the clinical scientist was as illustrious as John Karam the person. In collaboration with Jerry Grodsky, his early professional accomplishments include landmark observations on the contributions of obesity to insulin resistance and the hyperinsulinism of Type II diabetes. The first paper in a series was designated a Citation Classic by Current Contents. He was one of the first to demonstrate the insulin-sparing effects of the biguanides. With Jack Gerich, John helped to define the role of glucagon in normal physiology and diabetic pathophysiology. With Graeme Bell, he was the first to describe a diabetes Type I susceptibility gene (IDDM 2). In addition to approximately 150 scientific publications, John contributed multiple chapters relating to diabetes, hypoglycemia and obesity to the Lange Medical Series that were published in several languages. In 1993, the American Diabetes Association recognized John Karam as the "Outstanding Physician Educator in Diabetes."

John Karam shared his career and life with his beloved wife, Mercina, for 45 years before her recent death, and with their two adoring daughters, Marina and Nicoletta. John once said that "when a great man dies it's like a library burns down." For his family friends and colleagues, the tragic death of this special person is a great personal and irreplaceable loss.

Jerry Grodsky