Dr. Harry E. Ungerleider

1895 - 1989

Dr. Harry E. Ungerleider died May 10th, well into his mid-nineties. Although long retired he will be remembered for a most productive career both in insurance medicine and clinical cardiology. Additionally his was an unforgettable personality, as all who knew him will recall. Genial, outgoing and outspoken he added substance and spice to the innumerable meetings in which he took part.

Born in Philadelphia, Dr. Ungerleider obtained his M.D. in 1915 at the Medical-Chirurgical College in Philadelphia, now part of the University of Pennsylvania. He interned at Philadelphia General Hospital, later was elected president of 'Old Blockley,' its alumni 'club.' He served in France with the Allied Expeditionary Forces during World War I, discharged as Lieutenant Colonel in 1919. Entering private practice in Philadelphia, Dr. Ungerleider 'served time' as medical officer at the Eastern State Penitentiary, and both his military and prison experiences provided him with a fund of salty reminiscences. He spent a number of summers in Minnesota, where he met his lovely wife Marian. He worked there in the experimental cardiology laboratory of Dr. George Fahn, Chairman of the Department of Medicine, who was renowned as a clinician and cardiologist and who had collaborated and published some of the initial studies in electrocardiography with Einthoven, founder of electrocardiography. Dr. Fahn and other Harry Underleider associates at the University of Minnesota, such as Dr. Arthur Kerkhof became life long friends, visiting the Equitable whenever in New York. At the Equitable Dr. Ungerleider installed an accurate but cumbersome French Boulitte string galvanometer electrocardiograph, one of the first—if not the first—in any insurance company. One of Dr. Ungerleider’s best known studies was carried out with Dr. Charles Clark in 1938 developing standards for the transverse diameter of the heart in relation to height and weight, a table still in use today as a measure of cardiac enlargement. Always oriented to research Dr. Ungerleider early on brought technological developments, such as roentgenkymography and ballistocardiography to the Equitable, these techniques providing the earliest signs of abnormalities in ventricular wall motion and measurement of cardiac force. Both of these functions have become essential aspects of diagnosis in coronary and other types of heart disease, using newer techniques which have supplanted roentgenkymography and ballistocardiography.

Recognizing the potential for epidemiological studies using the vast amount of data in insurance sources, Dr. Ungerleider created the first department of medical research becoming its Director, with this writer as Assistant Director. Our collaboration extended over many years focusing particularly on electrocardiographic studies and prognosis in coronary heart disease, and their relevance to insurability. Many of these studies, such as the adverse significance in hypertensives of electrocardiographic signs of left ventricular hypertrophy (whose first voltage criteria were established) and confirmed at a later date by the Framingham Heart Study. Another, deriving from the 1959 Build and Blood Pressure Study of the Societies of Actuaries and Medical Directors was the first to demonstrate the independent significance of elevated systolic blood pressure as a pathogenetic entity apart from the level of the diastolic pressure. This was likewise confirmed by the Framingham and other studies.

During these years not only was research carried out at the home office but in collaboration with and support of outside centers. These included joint studies on lipoprotein analysis and abnormalities pioneered in the laboratory of Dr. Edwin Cohn and John Oncley at Harvard. Dr. Frank N. Gusol was brought from Harvard to head up a laboratory at the Equitable, complete with ultracentrifuge, where some of the earliest studies on lipoprotein abnormalities in coronary disease and diabetes were carried out. Additionally, a series of diaminodiphenylsulphones was synthesized in the Equitable Chemical Laboratory. In joint studies with Dr. Rene Dubos at the Rockefeller Institute these proved to have a favorable effect in experimental mouse tuberculosis and the findings were presented and published jointly at the Annual Clinical Research Conference of the American Heart Association. Another series of pharmacological investigations sponsored by the Equitable at Downstate-Kings County Hospital and at Lederle Laboratories was the discovery and introduction to clinical medicine of folic acid antagonists (aminopterin, amethopterin) in non-neoplastic disease. Today methotrexate (amethopterin) remains a major therapeutic agent in psoriasis, psoriatic arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma and several auto-immune diseases, all described in our several early studies.

In 1958 the many excellent training lectures in the series of courses preparing candidates for the Board of Life Insurance Medicine were collated, systematized and edited by Dr. Ungerleider and myself and published by C.C. Thomas as a text: Life Insurance and Medicine: The Prognoses and Underwriting of Diseases. This included the first underwriting table with standard ratings for various aspects of coronary heart disease, subsequently published separately in the American Heart Journal.

As noted, during his long career at the Equitable, Dr. Ungerleider was most active in clinical as well as insurance organization, fostering rapport between these specialties probably more effectively than any other individual. In addition to editing the annual Transactions of the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors of America, of which he was later President, Dr. Ungerleider was a long time officer of the American Therapeutic Society and its President as well. He was particularly active in the various councils and committees of the then burgeoning American Heart Association, serving as Secretary of the American Heart Association. Under his guidance the first study of disability following coronary thrombosis was carried out with participation of over 500 leading American cardiologists, with conclusions that stand up well today, indicating full rehabilitation in the large majority after attacks of acute myocardial infarction. Other committees to which he made significant contributions included Standardization of Blood Pressure Readings, and a brief monograph, Examination of the Heart; to which should be added a series of joint meetings between leading members of various councils of the American Heart Association and Life Insurance Medical Directors. The transcribed proceedings, on subjects which included Congenital Heart Disease, Hypertension, Surgery in Heart Disease, and Coronary Disease were published in several volumes of the ALIMDA annual transactions.

In 1959, Dr. Ungerleider left the Equitable to become Medical Director of the North American Reassurance Company and consultant to the parent company Swiss Re. His many years in this capacity were ones he enjoyed greatly for it gave him opportunity to travel widely and to meet and instruct younger medical and lay personnel in underwriting. After retiring from these posts, because of his advanced age, Harry and Marian moved from New York to California, first to Ventura and then to Anaheim to be closer to their daughter, Barbara Barnard and Ellen Juhasz and their families. A memorable occasion at Anaheim was a dinner honoring him at the annual meeting of the American Heart Association arranged by Dr. Campbell Moses, then its Executive Director, and Dr. Harry Blackburn, a distinguished cardiac epidemiologist, as well as insurance medical director in Minnesota and a long time friend.

Intellectually active and feisty until his last days, I remember visiting Harry Ungerleider in Anaheim, where over lunch he said to me with a puckish smile (cigar in hand as always), "Dick, I don’t have an enemy in the world; I’ve outlived all the bastards." True to form, this was said jocularly, for few in our profession have had more friends.

Richard S. Gubner, M.D.