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IN MEMORIAM



Otto Neubuerger, MD, 1929-2009

It was at about 9 p.m. on Sunday, July 19 when my phone rang and the male voice at the other end identified himself as Christopher Neubuerger. The first thing I said was, “You aren’t calling me with good news, are you, Christopher?” And he immediately replied that indeed he was not.

Otto was supposed to have joined Christopher and his wife, Gabriella, at their home for dinner. When he did not appear, Christopher went over to Otto’s place at Campus Commons to see what was the matter.

He found Otto dead at the kitchen table, the Sunday crossword puzzle on the table. Otto habitually worked the Sunday newspaper crossword puzzle.

He had been close to completing the puzzle when he died. A pencil lay on the table nearby, and he was working on a clue that was something like “Goatherd namesake of Spyri novel.” The answer is “Heidi.” He had filled in the first three letters, H-E-I.

Otto’s daughter, Heidi, had died of breast cancer at age 29, on Easter Sunday in 1987.

I first met Otto in the summer of 1980 when I came from Los Angeles to join him in practice with Bill Ballou and Bill Hicks.

When you met Otto, you definitely met Sheilagh and all the kids — Tina, Karl, Heidi, Holly, Nubbins, and Topher. When I came to town, they were settled into their ark of a house on Crocker Road. My wife, Mary, and I immediately felt as if we were all old friends.

Heidi and Christopher frequently babysat for us. The Neubuerger home was always open, and a knock on the door gained admission to a happy, hectic family environment where you were always welcome and refreshments and food and good cheer were abundant.

Otto was born in Munich, Germany on September 2, 1929, and came to the United States at age 9. His father, a neuropathologist, had been born Jewish and converted to Roman Catholicism, perhaps to deflect attention from

the Nazi government and also to marry Otto's Catholic mother, a general practitioner.

The Neuburger family got out of Germany a year before World War II began and settled in Denver, Colorado. Otto attended the University of Denver and then the University of Colorado Medical School. He did a general internship at Rockford, Illinois, Memorial Hospital and completed his general practice training at Ireland Army Hospital at Fort Knox, Kentucky. From there he was assigned for 3 years as a general medical officer at the United States Army Hospital in Muenchweiler, West Germany.

After his Army service, he came to Sacramento in 1961 to join Bill Ballou in general practice and alcoholism treatment. He joined the Medical Society in 1962.

I worked with Otto for only 5 years, from July of 1980 until September of 1985, but we remained close friends until his death.

He was a straight thinker and always made sure his brain was fully in gear before opening his mouth to speak. He always thought things through before pronouncing on a subject. Whether on clinical matters or medical political matters, his opinions were always worth consideration.

After Bill Ballou died, he was one of very few doctors in Sacramento who welcomed alcoholics into his practice. He believed fervently in the aversion-based treatment program at Raleigh Hills Hospital in Fair Oaks and ran it in a completely ethical matter as medical director — even when its parent company came under fire in the national press and some local physicians publicly denounced the methodology used at Raleigh Hills.

He served as a delegate to the California Medical Association and sat on and/or chaired several Medical Society committees. He was chief of staff at American River Hospital, and he was awarded the Medical Society's Golden Stethoscope Award in 1992.

One his most personally satisfying accomplishments was the production and publication of "The Painful Dilemma," a report prepared for general readership regarding the use of long term narcotic pain medications in patients with chronic pain. It is still very much worth reading.

After retirement, Otto remained active at the Society in the Historical Committee and as a medical museum docent. When he died, he was still employed doing military induction physical exams.

A few weeks before he died, we met for dinner at one of his favorite restaurants, the nearby Greek Village Inn. He always had the lamb shanks and I almost always had moussaka. Both dishes were always washed down with cheap red wine.

As usual, it was a pleasant rendezvous. I always enjoyed his thoughts on life and politics, and I guess he enjoyed my sophomoric humor.

After we bade each other goodnight, I watched him limp towards his car. For the umpteenth time, I wished I had asked him about the botched hip surgery, done long before I had met him, that had created what was obviously an unpleasantly antalgic gait about which he never complained.

Oh well, I guess I will do that next time I see him...

— *John Ostrich, MD*