Remembrance

December 9th 2000, Edward H. Ahrens Jr., former Director of the Lipid Metabolism Laboratory at the Rockefeller University passed away at the Princeton Medical Center in New Jersey. He was 85 years old. For those of us who had the privilege of working with him, this news was received with great sadness and evoked many fond memories. In the early sixties, there was a lively and highly interactive group in his laboratory who shares these memories with me. This group included Scott Grundy, Jules Hirsch, Robert Lees, Tatu Miettinen, Eder Quintão, Gerry Salen, Norton Spritz and Peter Woodford. The late Wilfred Simonds whose fairy fingers could catheterize a rat lymph duct in seconds was also among us.

We all appreciated the thoroughness, precision, hard logic and great dedication of “Pete,” as he liked us to call him. Highly compulsive and hardworking, he was virtually the only “clean desk” investigator I had met in my life. He was always on top of things, met all his deadlines ahead of the mark and his secretary, Barbara Wightman, knew that he would not tolerate a single paper on his desk (a dreadful sign of unfinished business!). He was an inspiration to us and we all recognized in him the great pioneer and outstanding leader he was in the lipid field. He was among the first to use gas chromatography to separate sterols, to demonstrate the lipid-lowering effect of unsaturated fatty acids, to develop the methodology needed to perform sterol balance studies in humans and to describe in full the phenotype of primary biliary cirrhosis. He was one of the small group of founders of the Journal of Lipid Research (1958) and he was elected to the medical section of the National Academy of Sciences in 1973. He became Professor Emeritus at the Rockefeller in 1985.

Even after he retired from his position at the Rockefeller University he remained close to the clinical research community. He remained fully dedicated to the cause of saving Clinical Researchers from extinction. His book, The Crisis in Clinical Research — Overcoming Institutional Obstacles, published by the Oxford University Press in 1992, is an authoritative analysis of the question and remains pertinent to the current situation. To work in Pete Ahrens’ laboratory became a very desirable goal for scientists from the world over. Many of those who sought training in clinical research with him are still very active in the lipid and lipoprotein field. Bill Insull is one of those who was among his first contingents of research fellows is still going strong and actively involved in clinical trials with lipid-lowering drugs. There were few students in this research area when the Rockefeller Institute (which served as a model for the Clinical Research Institute of Montreal) became the Rockefeller University. Glenn Paulson and Scott Grundy were of this rare breed. Maurice Mishkel is the other Canadian I know who trained with Pete Ahrens.

In his “retirement,” Pete Ahrens became interested in plant biology and genetics and with his charming wife, Bonnie, developed an arboretum in the Catskills Mountains near his summer retreat in Tannersville, New York. This was one of his pet projects, as he had a long-standing interest in plant research and was a member of the board of the New York Botanical Garden from 1981 to 1993.

Pete was a very direct person who never hesitated to speak his mind. He had an inner sense of righteousness, and was a great teacher of research methodology. Rigor, focus on
excellence, honesty and courage best characterized the man. He was generous of his time, very supportive and understanding. I will never forget one of his many generous gestures, that of sharing with the members of his team a case of Chateau Lafitte 1959 he had received from the Baron himself. To this date I remain deeply indebted to my first mentor in research, Dr. Jacques Genest a good friend of the Ahrens, for having made my sojourn in Pete’s laboratory possible at the dawn of my research career. I will always remember Pete, the three years spent at the Rockefeller under his guidance, and the outstanding team of people he put together at the time, with immense gratefulness and affection.

Recently, I dedicated an article in memoriam to Edward H. Ahrens Jr. when I received the Michel Sarrazin award for Clinical Research in Quebec (Apolipoprotéine E, une molécule polymorphe et pléiotrope, Sang, Thrombose et Vaisseaux 2002;14:35 – 58; 107–120). It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to speak at the New York Lipid and Vascular Biology Research Club (Feb. 5, 2002) in a series of presentation on the “Trails of Dr Ahrens” and to write this remembrance for the special issue of the “Cardiovascular Drug Reviews” dedicated in his memory. This outstanding clinical scientist deserves to be recognized for his legacy.

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