Harriet Pearson Dustan

On June 27, 1999, the world of medicine, the entire cardiovascular community and, in particular, our hypertension clinical and research field lost a tireless leader, advocate, and worker with the passing of Harriet Pearson Dustan from our midst. Certainly, my family lost a valued and devoted “member” and, I, a close and dear friend and colleague. After a long-standing and energy-depleting illness, she finally succumbed to lung cancer, but not without planning for the acknowledged eventuality. Indeed, the week before her death, she systematically called her friends to inquire as to their families and work and to extend her personal farewells. How typical this was of this most selfless and very private person.

Doctor Dustan was born in the very small and remote community of Craftsbury Common, Vermont, where she received her early education at the Craftsbury Academy as well as from her mother who had an extensive knowledge of literature. She then went on to receive her undergraduate and medical education at the University of Vermont; in later years, the University benefited from her counsel as a member of its Board of Trustees and a faithful supporter and active worker. Later, in her retirement, she actively participated in the academic activities of its Departments of Pharmacology, Physiology, and Medicine.

Following her graduate medical education, she interned at the then Mary Fletcher Hospital and then served her residency in internal medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. She returned to Burlington to help establish the medical student teaching program at the Bishop DeGosbriand Hospital. In 1948, she came to the Research Division of the Cleveland Clinic with Doctors Irvine H. Page and Arthur C. Corcoran. It was there that she participated in the investigation of each and all of the antihypertensive medications in its early years. It was she who described the hexamethonium lung, the actions and mechanisms of chlorothiazide, and many others. She studied the effects of serotonin, the pathophysiological correlates of plasma renin activity, the responses of the various types of patients with hypertension to discontinuance of antihypertensive medications, and the participation of sodium and obesity in the hypertensive state. Her iconoclastic comments and insights about the uniqueness of the pathophysiology of the vascular disease in the black patient with hypertension are cited in the journal.1 It was at the Cleveland Clinic where I joined Dusty and Irv Page in their hypertension research program; and it was with considerable personal pride and satisfaction that she termed these years as our “halcyon days.”

After over 30 years at the Cleveland Clinic, she was invited by Doctor Thomas James to join the Center of Excellence in Cardiovascular Medicine as the Director of the Cardiovascular Research and Education Program at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. During these years, Dusty brought to the program a Specialized Center of Research (SCOR) in Hypertension, the honors of serving as President of the American Heart Association, member of the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute’s Advisory Council, member of the Board of Reagents of the American College of Physicians, and Chairman of the American Board of Internal Medicine’s Residency Review Committee, to mention but a few of the responsibilities that she assumed in a lifetime career of service. At the time of her retirement from UAB, she had also completed her tenure as the Distinguished Physician at the Department of Veterans Affairs Hospital in Birmingham.

It was at Birmingham that Harriet Dustan launched this journal Hypertension as its first Editor-in-Chief. Her personal comments on the events leading to the establishment of the journal2 and the history of the Council for High Blood Pressure Research3 are part of the referenced chronicles of our journal. Even during her terminal illness, she provided her unique insights reviewing many papers each year; the most recent only two months ago.

Over the years Doctor Dustan received many honors: the Scientific Achievement Award from the American Medical Association, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Council for High Blood Pressure Research, the Distin-

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guished Service Award of the American College of Cardiology, the John Phillips Memorial Award of the American College of Physics, and Honorary Degrees from the University of Vermont, Cleveland State University, the Medical College of Pennsylvania, and St. Michael’s College.

What more can one add to these inadequate reflections of a close and dear friend. That she was slight in stature but a giant among peers. That in her intense personal privacy, she was a larger than life public leader. That her major personal contributions to hypertension and to medicine were dwarfed by her impact to man and society through her lasting commitment to service. With deep remorse my family and I as well as our entire hypertension community bid you, Dusty, a thankful and heartfelt “Farewell!”

References

Edward D. Frohlich, MD.
Editor-in-Chief

Editor’s Note
For those who might wish to join her many friends in expressing their farewells to Harriet Dustan in person, there will be a special memorial service at the Ira Allen Chapel at the University of Vermont at 11 AM on Saturday, September 25, 1999.