

Edward Harris, Jr., M.D., '60: Circle of influence

By Paula Hartman Cohen

It's not the letter informing him that he will be awarded the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) Presidential Gold Medal in November. It's not his name on the cover of the nation's top rheumatology textbook. It's not the trappings from his eight years as chair of medicine at Stanford.

No, the item in his spacious, book-lined office that Dr. Edward Harris first shows a visiting interviewer is an inscribed photograph dating back to the 1970s. The photo, he explains, depicts his mentor and friend Dr. Joshua Bent Burnett, the founder of the rheumatology section at Dartmouth. Burnett and Harris worked together from 1970 to 1983—building up the section, developing a research infrastructure, and reaching out to patients all over New Hampshire who suffered from the crippling, painful effects of rheumatoid arthritis and other musculoskeletal diseases. The way Burnett captured that shared effort, in his inscription on the photo, was “Ted: Without [you] nothing, with [you] a triumph!”

Although Burnett died in 1993, he lived to see his protégé become an internationally recognized researcher, the coauthor of *Kelley's Textbook of Rheumatology* (considered by many to be the gold standard in the field), and an educator, clinician, academic administrator, consultant, writer, journal editor—and mentor himself. In November, the ACR will bestow its highest award, the Presidential Gold Medal, on Harris in recognition of his major contributions to rheumatology.

At Stanford, Harris chaired the Department of Medicine from 1987 to 1995. Though he officially retired in 2003 (he is now the George DeForest Barnett Professor Emeritus), he was called back to serve as academic secretary to the university until he retired yet again earlier this year. Well, semi-retired. He's still active in two posts that he's held since 1997—executive secretary of Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA), the national medical honor society, and editor of *The Pharos*, a quarterly magazine published by AOA.

As the academic secretary at Stanford, Harris wrote the minutes of Faculty Senate meetings. “The best thing about the job,” he says with a smile, “was the chance it gave me to drop an unexpected line or two into the published minutes.” His minutes were legendary, according to a recent story in the *Stanford Report*. Not only did he spice

Grew up: A small town outside Harrisburg, Pa.

Education: Dartmouth College '58 (B.A. in English); Dartmouth Medical School '60 (B.M.S.); Harvard Medical School '62 (M.D.)

Training: Massachusetts General Hospital (medicine and rheumatology)

Age as of 07/07/07: 70

Number of children (and grandchildren): Three (and four)

Favorite film: *A Fish Called Wanda*

Favorite activities: Golfing, kayaking, fly-fishing

Favorite fishing spot: Norford Lake in Norwich, Vt.

Harris's humorous touches in the minutes of Stanford Faculty Senate meetings were legendary.

them up with that “unexpected line or two,” but he'd sometimes invent humorous explanations for faculty actions. For example, the minutes of one April meeting noted that the “senators, hurrying back from filing extensions for their income taxes, straggled in a bit late.”

Harris's literary talents are not surprising, considering that he was an English major at Dartmouth College. But early on, he decided to pursue a career in medicine because he wanted to help people.

At Dartmouth Medical School, Harris got his first dose of medical research, thanks to Dr. Fairfield Goodale, an assistant professor of pathology who went on to serve as dean at two medical schools.

“My memories are vivid of attempting to determine whether hypothermia induced in rats, sufficient to cause cardiac arrest, could protect bone marrow progenitor cells from gamma radiation damage,” Harris says. “We resuscitated them with the heat of a gooseneck lamp and a rubber tube for mouth-to-nose oxygenation. We rarely lost a rat.”

Harris went on to complete his M.D. at Harvard (since DMS then offered only a two-year preclinical program). He got another dose of research when he was tapped for a summer clerkship at Oxford in the lab of Sir George Pickering, widely known for his studies of hypertension and the physiology of blood vessels.

After two years of residency training at Massachusetts General Hospital, Harris fulfilled his military obligation in the U.S. Public Health Service at the National Heart Institute in Bethesda, Md. There he got yet another dose of research, this time focusing on collagen, the main structural protein in skin, tendon, bone, cartilage, and connective tissue. Upon his return to Mass General, he completed his residency and then went on to do a fellowship in rheumatology in the lab of Dr. Stephen Krane, where he worked on the mechanisms by which rheumatoid arthritis destroyed joints.

In 1970, Burnett, who at the time was New Hampshire's sole rheumatologist, got together with Dr. Thomas Almy, chair of medicine at Dartmouth, and Dr. Carlton Chapman, the dean of the Medical School, and recruited Harris to Dartmouth to help build a robust rheumatology section at the Hitchcock Clinic. Harris was appointed chief of the connective tissue disease section, and as he and Burnett developed the rheumatology program they became fast friends.

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“Ted showed great respect for Josh,” recalls Dr. Heinz Valtin, the Vail and Hampers Professor Emeritus at DMS. “The rheumatology section took on a more meaningful form with the two of them working together.”

Harris also recruited scientists to Dartmouth to do rheumatology research. “Ted expected us to achieve,” says Constance Brinckerhoff, Ph.D., who was one of those scientists and is now DMS’s associate dean for science education as well as the Nathan Smith Professor of Medicine and of Biochemistry. “He said, ‘Jump,’” she recalls, “and you said, ‘How high?’ because he was usually right.” She credits Harris with mentoring her and helping her to launch her own career.

Over the next 13 years, Harris and other researchers at Dartmouth broadened the understanding of rheumatoid arthritis and of the role that enzymes like collagenases and metalloproteases play in its progression. During that period, national interest in arthritis made funding available for arthritis research centers, and Dartmouth became one of the first institutions to host one. Harris was named its director. And at the same time, he also chaired a committee that designed a new curriculum for DMS.

Then, in 1983, Rutgers Medical School (now UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson School of Medicine) in New Jersey lured him away to be chair of medicine. Four years later, he moved on to chair the Department of Medicine at Stanford.

He has also served on or headed numerous important organizations. Most significantly, he was president of the American College of Rheumatology and, during his tenure, helped to arrange an amicable separation of the ACR and the Arthritis Foundation, so the ACR’s investigators and clinicians could control their own research. He was also governor of the American College of Physicians’ New Jersey and Northern California chapters, president of the California Academy of Medicine, and head of various scientific study groups and advisory boards. He was named a fellow in the British Royal College of Physicians in 2002.

Being able to communicate about his work, especially in writing, has been important to him. “That English major at Dartmouth has perhaps been the greatest help of all my formal training,” he says. He has used the tool of writing every step of the way along his career path. The author of more than 200 journal articles, abstracts, reviews, book chapters, and books, Harris may be best known as one of the four



Majoring in English at Dartmouth College, says Ted Harris, the emeritus chair of medicine at Stanford, did more to help him in his career than anything else.

founding editors of *Kelley’s Textbook of Rheumatology*, which is about to be released in its eighth edition.

He also is sole author of a seminal 1997 monograph, *Rheumatoid Arthritis*, which incorporated all the clinical and scientific knowledge then known about the disease. Many clinical advances in rheumatology can be attributed to work in cell biology, biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, and immunology, Harris says. “The next step could be to develop specific therapies to inhibit collagenases and other metalloproteases. That hasn’t happened yet,” he adds, but when it does, it “will be like the finding the Holy Grail” for those in the field.

That Dartmouth English degree also came in handy when, in 1997, Harris was named executive secretary of AOA and editor of *The Pharos*, the society’s nontechnical compendium of essays; poetry; art; and articles on medical history, ethics, and health policy. “He’s given it all kinds of life, added color, and new design,” says Valtin. “He didn’t revive the journal as much as create it.”

Harris also created a 532-page anthology called *Creative Healers: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, and Poems from The Pharos, 1938-1998*, published by AOA in 2004. Reviewers on Amazon.com have mentioned the editor’s keen eye for engaging writing, calling the volume’s contents “moving” and “a tribute to the range of interests percolating around in active intellects.”

Today, Harris divides his time between working at the AOA office and doing community service. He’s on the boards of the California Water Service Company and the Genentech Foundation for Education and Research, which supports creative initiatives in science education in Bay Area schools. When he’s not working, he’s playing golf in California or summering on Martha’s Vineyard, where he also golfs, walks on the beach, takes lazy kayak excursions, catches up with friends (including Brinckerhoff), and volunteers as a consulting physician at a federally sponsored clinic for the uninsured. There are “a lot of aches and pains in this community,” he notes, “and no rheumatologist on the island.”

While Harris has had a notable career as a researcher and clinician, he says “the best accomplishment I can point to is helping others—my three boys, students, residents, fellows, colleagues—achieve their potentials.” He is, he adds, “proud of who they are and what they have done.” Probably just as proud as Burnett was of him. ■