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William Dameshek, 1900–1969

HEMATOLOGISTS throughout the world were shocked to learn of the sudden death of William Dameshek on October 6, 1969. He died while undergoing open heart surgery in an attempt to repair the defect of a dissecting aneurysm. In characteristic fashion, he was active and vigorous right up to the onset of illness two days before death.

The life span of Dr. Dameshek covered the emergence of hematology from a minor descriptive discipline to a broad-based science embracing all facets of physiology, biochemistry, and nuclear physics.

He was born in Veronezh, Russia, on May 22, 1900, and was brought to this country in 1903, too young to recall the circumstances of his arrival. As a young man growing up in America, he quickly displayed the relentless energy which was to characterize his later life. He graduated from the Harvard Medical School at the age of 23 and in the same year married his beloved wife Rose, who remained his constant companion thereafter. His only daughter, Elinor, was born a decade later.

After an internship and residency at the Boston City Hospital, Dr. Dameshek began his professional career at the hematology laboratory there. Three years later he moved to the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, where he became chief of the blood clinic for a 9-year period. He then went to the New England Medical Center, where he worked for 26 years as chief of the hematology

laboratory of Tufts University Medical School and Hematologist-in-chief of the Floating Hospital and Boston Dispensary. Due to the quality of his work, his laboratory soon became world-renowned and attracted students and research fellows from all parts of the world. During this period he displayed one of the most important features of his dynamic personality: an ability to inspire others through personal example. His students became endowed with a sense of greatness that made them often achieve goals beyond their normal reach. During this same era another aspect of his ability became manifest. This was a talent to organize and administer. He helped to establish the International Society of Hematology and became one of its early presidents. Later he fought almost alone to overcome significant resistance in this country against the organization of an American Society of Hematology. Many hematologists within the United States were opposed to the concept of a national society and believed that hematology was too diffuse a discipline to justify the creation of another scientific body. The nearly explosive growth of the American Society of Hematology after its origin in Boston in 1956 demonstrated clearly the correctness of his foresight. By the time he assumed the presidency of the society a few years later, it had more than a thousand active members. In a similar manner, he became the first editor of the journal BLOOD, when its publication began in 1946, and remained Editor-in-chief up to the time of his death. Through rigid adherence to the highest scientific standards, he was able quickly to achieve world-wide recognition of this journal as pre-eminent in the field.

As with many great men of medicine, Dr. Dameshek's first published manuscripts did not reflect his eventual field of specialization. In 1922, while still a medical student, he published an article on backache, followed in successive years by reports on such diverse topics as hyperthyroidism and typhus fever. His hematologic interest emerged in 1926 with a paper on reticulated red cells. This coincided with the completion of his work in the hematology laboratory at Boston City Hospital and his establishment of a blood clinic at the Beth Israel Hospital. Three years later his deep interest in agranulocytosis was first shown by a study on benzene poisoning, followed later by case reports of agranulocytosis after dinitrophenol, amidopyrine, and similar marrow toxins. After moving to the New England Medical Center and establishing an investigative laboratory there, his clinical interests broadened. Communications which were co-authored by various students now included the hemolytic syndromes and the role of the spleen in regulation of cellular kinetics. By the late 1940's, his interest in leukemia became more dominant. This continued for the duration of his life. In addition to manifold publications on this subject, he collaborated with one of his students on a leukemia monograph. His publications in the field of neoplasia perhaps reached their peak with his reports on the Di Guglielmo syndrome. His ability to stimulate others who did not necessarily agree with him was classically shown in his Plenary Session Speech at the Rome Congress of the International Society of Hematology in 1958. On this occasion, with Dr. Di Guglielmo in attendance, Dr. Dameshek proposed a new description for Di Guglielmo disease and suggested a possible similarity between the maturation arrest of megaloblastic

(pernicious) anemia and the morphologically similar proerythroblasts of this syndrome. A period of interest in hemostasis emerged with his publications on idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura and other deranged hemostatic states. In a series of studies co-authored by his numerous students and fellows, he defined the mechanisms of platelet production and removal and also investigated and described some of the coagulation disorders. The subject which was to occupy the last decade of his life was that of immunohematology and the possible interrelationship of benign and malignant lymphoblastic transformations. Throughout all of his publications, he displayed a remarkable ability to challenge the staid concepts of workers in different disciplines.

His honors were many and reflected the broad base of his interests. In addition to numerous honorary professorships at universities throughout the world, he received the Certificate of Merit of the American Medical Association in 1942, the Billings Silver Medal in 1952 and 1953, and the Premio Ferrata Medal in 1958. He was awarded the Miller O. Thompson Gold Medal of the American Geriatrics Society in 1968.

In 1966, Dr. Dameshek retired from the New England Medical Center as Professor of Medicine Emeritus to move to New York City and begin a new career as Professor of Medicine at the Mount Sinai Medical School. At an age when many men begin to narrow their horizons and withdraw from the turmoil of life, he began this final tour of duty with the same vigor and enthusiasm as a young man attaining his first professional appointment. At his retirement banquet on leaving Boston, he introduced his mother, who was still as alert as her energetic son.

During his few brief years in New York, he continued widely to travel throughout the world and to continue to inspire young men to enter the specialty of hematology. Despite the wide diversity of his concepts, publications, and travels, his friends will remember him most for his innate humanism. He was always interested in people, whether they were students, patients, or scientific colleagues.

He was able to see beyond the limitations of their geographic or ethnic origins and to persuade them to work together toward the larger goals of mankind.

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