In Memoriam: F. Stephen Vogel, MD

September 29, 1919–August 4, 2015

F. Stephen Vogel lived almost 96 years and, thus, many current members of the neuropathology community may never have had the good fortune to meet him. Fewer still may have known him well personally, and uncommon indeed are trainees such as myself who witnessed his diagnostic skills, wisdom, grace, dignity, and sense of humor first hand. I hope that this testimony might refresh memories of people who knew him and inform those who did not.

Steve graduated from Cornell Medical School and did his pathology training at the same institution, with neuropathology studies done under his mentor Lewis Stevenson. Steve moved to a relatively new medical school in the piney environment of Durham, North Carolina, at Duke University, where he founded and then headed the Division of Neuropathology for 30 years.

I first met Steve when I visited the department for a possible residency position in pathology. He proudly pulled dripping electron-microscopy plates from the wash, showing me cultured mitochondria as part of his project isolating a compound from mushrooms that might be used to treat malignant melanoma. As befits one who had summered on a farm, Steve was a man of nature who relished the idea that an anticancer drug would have come from what he described as “nature’s apothecary.”

Another major interest as dear to his heart was a prescient project known to us as the “moon mice.” As we now contemplate a trip to Mars, the effects of cosmic rays on the human brain during space travel remain an important issue. Plastic sheets were implanted in the scalp of the animals and analyzed after returning from orbit to define the paths of penetrating particles. The goal was to identify tracks in the plastic and follow the trajectories into the subjacent brain.

Personally, Steve was a delight: calm, philosophical, generous, and remarkably efficient. Visiting his office, one would scarcely have known that, at various times, he was President of the American Association of Neuropathologists, United States and Canadian Academy of Pathology, and International Academy of Pathology, among other major administrative roles. Other than a small carved wooden duck and a few other memorabilia, his desk was always clean, and his office was an inviting refuge of tranquility and common sense.

Clinically, Steve was an experienced general surgical pathologist and exceptional neuropathologist who brought the same calm rationality to the subjects that he applied to other aspects of his life and work. Multiple trainees, many in academic practice, attest to his clinical influence.

There are certainly other professionals who may have resumes as impressive as his, but no one was a more captivating writer. In addition to concision and precision, which are difficult enough to effect, Steve could also conjure up the most apt, humorous comparisons between disease features and any number of workaday nonmedical subjects. In the context of a usually somber medical text, these unannounced, often whimsical, gems are as immensely pleasing as they are illustrative. They left an indelible positive impression, just as he himself did.

Steve was a philosophical man of big thoughts and many professional accomplishments, but also a simple person
who took pleasure in little things such as his Ford Bronco, an early sport-utility vehicle he drove for many years, a flock of guinea fowl roosting on and around his house, his sheepdog, and a bass in his pond big enough to enjoy ducklings for lunch. Winemaking and beekeeping were other interests of a man imbued with nature. He shared these interests with his large family with whom he was very close. Two of his sons are pathologists; a daughter is a veterinarian.

By his physically commanding stature, elegant hair, calm demeanor, vast experience, and resonant voice, he embodied the gray eminence. When he spoke, people listened because he always had something to say. Innumerable medical trainees at all levels, practicing physicians, and patients alike have been indebted to the skills, efforts, and personality of F. Stephen Vogel. His passing is a great loss, but it provides the opportunity to pay tribute and, by reflecting on his life and influence, to appreciate him even more (1).

Peter C. Burger

This tribute comes from a devoted student of Dr F. Stephen Vogel, a student who has now been a neuropathologist for over 3 decades. I came to train with Dr Vogel as a pediatrician some 30 years ago—and I left 2 years later as a committed neuropathologist.

Those of us in the American Association of Neuropathologists knew Dr Vogel as a consummate surgical and autopsy neuropathologist, basic researcher, coauthor (with Peter C. Burger) of a masterful textbook on surgical neuropathology, dedicated scholar, and major contributor to the advancement of neuropathology through his leadership in many professional associations (Fig. 1). A lucky few of us knew Dr Vogel as a teacher and a mentor (Fig. 2).

Dr Vogel was a teacher beyond comparison. I have tried to emulate his teaching ways in my career. I have made a study of them. First, he cared; he cared about patients, and he cared that his students learned how to think deeply about how to understand and help them the best.

Second, his lectures exuded his devotion and love for neuropathology. With medical students and residents, he would ask them to come to the front and point to different neuroanatomic structures and lesions on the slides on the screen. He was never degrading or demeaning; he was a kind coach, always rooting for you to get it right. The purpose of this exercise, as I came to understand, was that Dr Vogel believed you thought hardest when you were in front of your peers, forced to think on your feet. In important ways, his lectures were never really lectures but instead were based upon the Socratic method. Dr Vogel shared his passion for neuropathology to engage students in their learning for themselves.

Third, Dr Vogel had a genius for making the complex simple and supporting a growing sense of mastery. He was renowned for his museum of gross brain and spinal cord specimens. He would have a student hold a specimen in its transparent container and ask them to answer 3 questions that would guide them to the neurological differential diagnosis: 1) where is the lesion? 2) How long has it been there (acute or chronic)? and 3) How old is the patient? Those 3 questions have held me in good stead as I approach patients with CNS lesions.

Fourth, Dr Vogel realized that students remember the complexities of pathology if the lesion is linked to a patient, that is, to the whole person that the patient is. He used the case-study method, presenting a disease as a problem of an individual. His lectures on multiple sclerosis or stroke began with a story about a patient, how the patient began to lose...
function, the progression of the signs and symptoms, and the cascade of hardship that came from pathology in this or that brain region. He believed that if you felt the patients’ stories and their lament, you were more invested in learning the basic mechanisms of their diseases. And the learning stuck faster and harder.

It was this fine humanity that distinguished him to me. I remember going out with him in his truck from Duke to the state mental hospital to cut brains. I listened to him talk of the institutionalized mentally ill, and the importance of understanding and preventing their diseases became real to me. Watching him hold the baffling, normal-appearing schizophrenic brain that still managed to place that soul in an institution for life, listening to him talk about limbic synapses gone awry and the havoc on the human life—these are moments I hold dear.

It was Dr Vogel’s teaching of the connection of the patient to brain pathology that I remember, and it is his basic kindness in emphasizing this connection that I try to teach my students—story after individual story—the case method. Dr Vogel led me to want to jump careers to study the human brain and its disorders. I thank him for giving me both an incredible career and the understanding of the grace of a great mentor.

Hannah C. Kinney

Reference