A Tribute to Richard Ehrenkranz

By Sarah Taylor, MD, MSCR

Through five decades, Dr. Richard “Rich” Ehrenkranz dedicated his career to neonatal medicine and research. His clinical studies shaped our understanding of infant development, and, distinctively, he revealed the relationship between preterm infant growth and neurodevelopment. Sadly, we lost this champion of neonatal research to cancer in August 2018.

Prior to his death, Rich shared a description of those who influenced his decision to enter neonatology. After starting his career with a bachelor’s in science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1968, he entered medical school at the State University of New York. During medical school, he crossed to the West Coast of the United States to perform a sub-internship at Stanford University in California. Rich describes that he “bonded with neonatology” as he worked under Dr. Philip Sunshine. This experience led to residency and fellowship training at Yale University with a two-year interlude at the National Institutes of Health as a research associate. After training, Rich joined the Yale Division of Neonatal Medicine in 1978. Rich’s early research with his mentor, Dr. Joseph Warshaw, focused on prevention of bronchopulmonary dysplasia and specifically oxygen-induced lung injury.

In the 1980’s, Rich began a collaboration with Dr. Laura Ment, Yale Pediatric Neurology, exploring the neurodevelopment of very preterm infants. These clinical trials led to Yale’s selection into the National Institute of Child and Human Development Neonatal Research Network (NRN) with Rich as the principal investigator in 1991. Through the NRN, Rich, with many other neonatal investigators, performed clinical trials to set the stage for evidence-based clinical practice. With the multi-center randomized trials design, they investigated the roles of numerous interventions—some of which are standard of care today, such as antenatal steroids, and some of which are no longer recommended due to the outcomes of these clinical trials. Additionally, the NRN published large cohort outcomes data with two specific publications transforming the clinical approach to growth and nutrition in neonatal intensive care units around the world. The NRN’s 1999 report “Longitudinal growth of hospitalized very low birthweight infants” (*Pediatrics* 104) and the 2006 report “Growth in the neonatal intensive care unit influences neurodevelopmental and growth outcomes of extremely low birth weight Infants” (*Pediatrics* 117) exposed the growth deficit associated with preterm birth and its neurologic consequences. Not only did Rich author these papers, but he traveled the world providing education and recommendations to improve clinical nutrition practice. Most likely, many of you had the opportunity to learn from Rich and to share your thoughts with him. He displayed a love of learning as much as he did a love for teaching.

Rich’s dedication to academia and to advancement of neonatal care was evident even as he realized that his cancer was terminal. Through 2018, Rich ensured that all his research and educational roles were passed to others, and he offered mentorship and guidance even after he had entered hospice care. His final address to the neonatal community included these words, “I have had the opportunity to work with many of you and we have become close friends and colleagues.  I want to personally thank you for all those interactions and memories.  During this difficult period of acquiring and maintaining [research] support, I urge you to strive to continue advancing the field of neonatal-perinatal medicine-our patients require it.” Rich was a shining example of both commitment to scientific investigation and enthusiasm for clinical improvement. For a life that ended too early, he left an indelible mark on neonatal medicine and inspired many of us to carry on our efforts to optimize preterm infant outcomes.

The Yale Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine and the Yale New Haven Children’s Hospital Neonatal Intensive Care Center will host a conference in Rich’s honor on May 13, 2019 in New Haven, Connecticut. “The Richard Ehrenkranz Neonatology Symposium: Nutrition, Neurodevelopment, and Outcomes” celebrates the life and work of Dr. Ehrenkranz by highlighting the next scientific frontier in early life exposures and how they affect long-term development.