In Memoriam: Jere Mead (1920–2009)

Peter T. Macklem

JERE MEAD did something very unusual. He established a whole new field of research. Respiratory Mechanics was his invention. Sure, there had been sporadic forays into the field beforehand, but nothing systematic. He created, developed, nurtured, and maintained this field while stimulating thousands of scientists from around the world to join him on his remarkable voyage of discovery. The luckiest of these scientists were those who had the opportunity to play with him. I was one of them. His philosophy was that research was fun. If it was not, it was too much like work. In playing together, he changed my life forever. Among the multitude of reasons that I am overwhelmingly grateful to him is that the joy of discovery has been a major part of my life. This lessens the sadness of his passing, but the sadness is still profound.

When he retired in 1987 he decided to divorce himself from mechanics and restore boats, but his family and mine remained close friends. One summer he and his wife Dot were coming to visit us. At the time Manuel Paiva was also staying with us and I warned Manuel, “Jere doesn’t like to discuss mechanics anymore so we should talk to him about other things.” We stuck to it. After 24 hours Jere could stand it no longer. “What are you two up to?” he asked. That ended it, the divorce was annulled, a dam was broken, and we talked mechanics non-stop. Like Brett Favre, Jere came back and remained at it to the end. His last publication was an analysis of how airway smooth muscle tone regulated the thickness of the periciliary liquid so that the tips of the cilia entered the mucus layer on the forward stroke but dipped down out of it on the backward stroke.

About 3 months before he died he wrote to me and proposed that we write a paper on expiratory flow limitation. He had some new ideas and was going to prepare an outline to which I would respond. Several weeks passed and I heard nothing more. Then he wrote an apologetic letter, saying that he had a compression fracture of a vertebra that was painful so that he couldn’t concentrate properly. But, he said, he’d get back to it as soon as he could. Alas, it never happened. Multiple myeloma robbed us of his last creative scientific act.

Let us celebrate his life. Why was he so great? Let me count the ways. His creativity was seemingly boundless. He challenged you and loved to be challenged back. He never thought questions were stupid and admired people who were brave enough to ask them. Doing research with him was fun. His contributions to new knowledge were enormous. He had lots to brag about, but he never did: he was too modest. A whole new generation of outstanding scientists emerged from his laboratory. He molded the way that respiratory physiologists and chest physicians the world over think about their answers to clinical and physiological problems. In his lab we often spent most of the day thinking and talking outlandishly and exploring crazy ideas about how to tackle seemingly insolvable problems. By this he taught us to be mavericks and gave us the greatest gift a scientist can have: the freedom to escape the bounds of convention. This freedom is the sine qua non of creativity in both art and science. He had it in spades and he passed it on to us. We have lost our leader, but his legacy is a brightly shining sun that will continue to nourish and guide us for eons to come.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Jeremiah Mead—born Madison, Wisconsin; BS (1943), MD (1946) Harvard; Drinker Professor of Environmental Physiology, Harvard School of Public Health, 1950–1987. He passed away on July 4, 2009. Dr. Mead’s prodigious series of studies on respiratory mechanics represented the highest level of integrative physiology published in the Journal of Applied Physiology throughout the history of this journal. He authored 112 manuscripts in the JAPPL, the first in volume 2, 1949 and the last in 2008 and served the journal many years on the editorial board and as a section editor. Fortunately, many of his students—and their students—continue to contribute importantly to our journal and to the APS.

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