In Memoriam: John W. “Jack” Griffin, MD

We lost a great neurologist, researcher, and teacher. John W. Griffin, MD, an internationally renowned expert on diseases of the peripheral nervous system, died of bladder cancer on Saturday, April 16, 2011, in Baltimore, Maryland. Known to his friends simply as Jack, he epitomized the definition of clinician-scientist and combined the virtues of an expert and compassionate clinician with a visionary researcher and teacher.

Jack graduated from Grinnell College in Iowa in 1963 with double majors in chemistry and Russian. He attended medical school at Stanford, where he met his future wife, Diane Edmund. Together they embarked on a career that culminated in both being inducted to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science together in 2004. After internship and a year of internal medicine residency at Stanford, Jack moved to Baltimore in 1970 to complete his neurology residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital under the first chair of the department, Guy McKhann. Apart from a 2-year fellowship at the National Institutes of Health (1973-1975), Jack spent his whole academic career at Hopkins, training many future academicians.

In more recent years, Jack turned his attention to neuropathic pain, a difficult-to-treat symptom that plagued most of his patients with peripheral neuropathies. Together with his colleagues at Hopkins, he developed a novel hypothesis that neuropathic pain arises from an imbalance between peptidergic and non-peptidergic C-fiber systems. Potential treatment approaches arising from this line of research are being tested in clinical trials.

In addition to his research, Jack is well known for his visionary leadership in academic medicine. As chair of the Department of Neurology at Johns Hopkins from 1998 to 2006, he oversaw a tripling of the research portfolio of the faculty and laid the groundwork for the department’s continued success as an academic powerhouse in neurology. He was always an advocate for junior faculty and young researchers. He believed in the success of the academic clinician-scientist model and on many occasions said that for a successful department he needed 3 faculty members to do the clinical workload of 1 neurologist so that each faculty member could devote enough time to research and education. While he was the chair of the Department of Neurology, he cochaired a schoolwide committee on faculty development and gender issues and advocated for gender equality and academic diversity.

His devotion to young members of the academic community extended beyond the walls of Johns Hopkins. As the president of the American Neurological Association in 2003 to 2005, he advocated for election of younger members of the academic community to the association and started a career development course as part of the annual meeting. Initially as president-elect and then as president of the Peripheral Nerve Society (1995-1999), he promoted funding for young investigators to attend the biannual meeting.

His advocacy for junior members of the profession has always been evident to his trainees. He was the classic definition of a “mentor.” This classic quote from Goethe epitomized Jack and his relationship with his mentees: “Who is the happiest of men? He who values the merits of others, and in their pleasure takes joy, even as though t’were his own.”

He always had a way of putting things together and made you feel like you had the greatest discovery. He was a great teacher to medical students and residents as well, garnering numerous teaching awards during his long tenure at Hopkins. However, students and residents were not the only ones who benefited from his teachings. His patients were probably his biggest students. He always approached each patient with tender care and taught them what a peripheral neuropathy was,
how to cope with the symptoms, and what to expect down the road. He forged relationships with some of his patients that go back almost 40 years.

Jack’s crowning achievement of his visionary leadership was establishment of the Brain Sciences Institute (BSi) at Johns Hopkins. He felt a strong conviction that true advances in neurosciences can only take place when a strong collaborative research environment is created and for many years pursued the goal of establishment of such a vehicle. In 2007, with the help of a generous anonymous donation, Jack established the universitywide BSi to foster collaboration among more than 500 neuroscientists at various campuses and schools of Johns Hopkins University. Furthermore, he wanted to create the infrastructure to help faculty develop therapies for neurological and psychiatric disorders. Recognizing that this would require the help of industry experts, last year he hired a whole team of experts from a small biotechnology company and established the Neurotranslational Unit within the BSi. Barely a year old, the BSi Neurotranslational Unit is already making significant inroads in helping Hopkins faculty develop innovative therapies for neurological disorders.

It is unfortunate that such a visionary life was cut short because of cancer. Although he had been battling bladder cancer since 2005, he never lost his spirit, curiosity, and devotion to his research, patients, and trainees. When a symposium honoring Jack was put together in early January 2011, many people from all over the world came to Hopkins to celebrate his life and learn from one another. Many people felt the symposium was one of the best events that they have ever attended.

To his patients, he will be remembered for his compassionate care; to his academic colleagues, he’ll be remembered for his “big-picture” vision and devotion to younger members of the community; and to his mentees, he’ll be remembered as their biggest “tattoos.” As said by P. A. Vesilind: “A mentor is like a tattoo, it stays with you forever.”

Ahmet Hoke, MD, PhD, FRCPC

Author Affiliation: Neuromuscular Division, Department of Neurology and Neuroscience, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

Correspondence: Dr Hoke, Neuromuscular Division, Johns Hopkins University, John G. Rangos Sr Bldg, 855 N Wolfe St, Neurology 248, Baltimore, MD 21205 (ahoke@jhmi.edu).

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