

Tribute to Arnold P. Gold, MD
January 25, 2018

Yesterday's call from Sandra relaying Arnold's desire that I make some remarks today stirred a mix of feelings in me, and led to a restless night. I struggled with how I could possibly convey the mixture of deep admiration, awe, and affection that I feel for Arnold—feelings that I know are shared by everyone in this room. As I tossed and turned overnight trying to compose what I wanted to say, one word kept coming back to me: miracle.

We all marvel at the medical miracles—the stunning advances in science and medicine—that we've seen take place over our lifetimes. In his career in medicine, Dr. Arnold P. Gold had a front row seat in these miraculous transformations. As a World War II Navy corpsman, he saw penicillin and other first-generation antibiotics become life-saving tools. While still a chief resident at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, he worked with Dr. Albert Sabin in his development of the oral vaccine that helped turn back the polio epidemic. That work put us on the road to now being on the cusp of eliminating polio worldwide. And as an internationally acclaimed pediatric neurologist, Arnold saw the mysteries of the brain slowly revealed, as CT scanning, then MRI scanning, then PET scanning gave us the ability to see brain structure and function in greater and greater detail. But above all, as a clinician and a teacher at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, he combined all of these advances with an extraordinary bedside manner—caring for his pediatric neurology patients and their families with remarkable wisdom and compassion.

All of this alone would mark the life of a man—the career of a physician—well lived. But then Arnold and his life partner and collaborator, Dr. Sandra Gold, managed to achieve their own medical miracle. Thirty years ago, Arnold recognized that the health of the medical profession itself was being threatened by a dangerous disorder. The “brain” of medicine, the power of science and intellect, was at serious risk for becoming detached from its “heart and soul.” He saw the ways in which our dependence on science and technology could stifle empathy and compassion—they were suppressing the bedrock of humanism at the core of being a physician.

It is one thing to recognize a malady, but it is something very special indeed to devise an effective treatment. Arnold and Sandra did exactly that through the work of the Gold Foundation. White coat ceremonies have become the rite of passage for students beginning medical school, affirming that humanism must always be true north for these young physicians throughout their career. The Gold Humanism Honor Society recognizes students, residents, and faculty members who are exemplars of these humanistic qualities in words and deeds. As I have traveled to scores of medical schools and teaching hospitals in recent years, I have seen a transformation occurring. What I have seen take place, whether or not it would ever be recognized with a Nobel Prize, qualifies as a medical miracle. The work led by Arnold and Sandra through the Gold Foundation has reconnected the science of medicine with the heart and soul of medicine. We are recognizing humanism as the strong core of what it means to be a physician. For that, Arnold, our profession and our patients—for generations to come—are profoundly grateful. You will be sorely missed by us, but we promise to take your work forward with the passion and commitment you showed us.

Darrell G. Kirch, MD
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