Lewis Dexter, MD 1910–1995

On December 3, 1995, Lewis Dexter, pioneer cardiologist, died in Massachusetts. Beloved by his family, his patients, and his trainees, Lewis Dexter made major contributions to cardiology as we know it today. On a snowy Saturday morning a week after his death, many of Lew’s family, friends, trainees, and colleagues assembled in the Church of Our Saviour in Brookline, Massachusetts, to celebrate the life of Lewis Dexter. The eulogy given by James E. Dalen, MD, Vice-President for Health Sciences at the University of Arizona, accurately reflects the feelings of the cardiologists assembled on that day. These remarks are reprinted here in their entirety.

I was very honored and saddened when Lew called me last January and asked me to say ‘a word or two’ about him at his funeral.

Lew was one of the most modest men I ever met. When I read his obituary in the Boston Globe, I knew that Lew had written it. The caption said it all: ‘Cardiologist, taught at Harvard’. True, but a little understated. Like Abraham Lincoln, lawyer, worked for the government, or Douglas MacArthur, soldier, served in World War II. Yes, Lew did teach at Harvard – for 35 years – then he retired and taught for 10 more years at UMass. He taught literally thousands of medical students and housestaff. He taught them about heart disease, but he taught each of them a lot more.

When you made rounds with Lew, it didn’t take long for you to realize that all his patients loved him. They loved him because he respected his patients and he loved them. In fact, this was the essence of Lew Dexter. He loved his family, his patients, his students, and his fellows. He loved everyone and everyone loved him.

As a teacher, Lew didn’t expect his students to memorize facts – he taught them to think – to figure it out. If you understand the pathophysiology you can predict the signs, symptoms, and lab findings.

Most of Lew’s students – and their families – were invited for supper at Lew and Sandy’s home in Brookline. It was an experience that very few will forget.

In 1967, Lew received the American Heart Association’s highest award for teaching – the Herrick Award. He won similar awards from the American College of Chest Physicians and the American College of Cardiology.

Yes, Lew Dexter taught at Harvard. He was one of the most respected and revered teachers in the history of the Harvard Medical School.

And, yes, Lew was a cardiologist. He taught himself to be a cardiologist and then he taught 60 fellows to become cardiologists. I am very proud to be one of those 60 cardiologists. Fifty of his fellows followed his example and became professors at medical schools all over the United States. They trained the next generation of cardiologists -I would estimate that 2,500 of our country’s cardiologists were trained by Lew or his fellows.
After his love for people, Lew’s second love was his ‘lab’ in the basement of the Brigham. It certainly was not prime space, and it certainly wasn’t plush. One of Lew’s classmates at Harvard Medical School, the late Dwight Harken, said the motto of the Brigham should be ‘Splendor amidst squalor’. The Dexter Lab was, in fact, splendor. The research performed in the Dexter Lab in the basement of the Brigham had a major impact on the treatment of heart disease throughout the world.

Lew Dexter was the first to pass a catheter into the pulmonary artery. He did so by mistake. When he told Sidney Burwell, the dean of Harvard Medical School, what he had done, Dr. Burwell said, ‘Can you do it again?’ Lew said, ‘Yes’. ‘Good, then you can figure out congenital heart disease.’ And, Lew did figure it out. He figured out how to measure intracardiac pressure and blood saturation in order to diagnose congenital heart disease. He then performed the first diagnostic cardiac catheterizations -he was the first to diagnose TOF, VSD, and ASD by cardiac cath. This led to the surgical correction of most forms of congenital heart disease. He then turned to rheumatic heart disease – and, again, showed how cardiac catheter-ization could accurately diagnose valvular heart disease. Again, this was the necessary prelude to the surgical correction of valvular heart disease. Research in the Dexter Lab clarified the pathophysiology of pulmonary hypertension and pulmonary embolism. In 1965, Lew received the Gold Medal for Research from the American Heart Association – their highest honor for research.

Not bad for a tiny lab in the basement of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital!

Yes, Lew Dexter was a cardiologist who taught at Harvard. He was the best cardiologist I ever knew and he was the best teacher I ever knew. But, far more important, he was the best person I ever knew.

December 9, 1995    James E. Dalen, MD, MPH