

The humanity of a Baylor surgeon: a tribute to Zeck Lieberman

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Editor's note: On March 25, 2008, Zelig ("Zeck") Lieberman, MD, was recognized at a reception at the Crescent Club marking his 50th anniversary at Baylor University Medical Center. More than 115 friends, family members, and associates gathered to pay tribute to Dr. Lieberman for his commitment to the surgical oncology profession as well as his dedication to Baylor. Dr. Fordtran delivered the following tribute during the event. Culminating the evening's celebrations, Rowland K. Robinson, president of the Baylor Health Care System Foundation, and Joel Allison, president and chief executive officer of the Baylor Health Care System, presented Dr. Lieberman with a plaque for his extraordinary service.

It was a challenge, as well as an honor, to be asked to deliver a tribute to Zeck Lieberman (Figure). The challenge was to come up with a theme that is not trite, as I would speak about a man who is well known to everyone at Baylor. After several false starts, I selected a bold purpose for my tribute. That was to discover the root cause of what makes Zeck Lieberman so much respected by his colleagues and so loved by his patients. In an attempt to answer this question, I needed some data, and I therefore asked nine of Zeck's colleagues to prepare a brief statement, only a sentence or two, on the essence of Zeck's greatness—what single thing has made him so unique and special. Marvin Stone and Charles Richardson helped me analyze the results of this survey.

Here are the responses we received.

Zeck Lieberman is a consummate physician. He exemplifies the importance of hard work, close observation, ongoing education, and a practical approach to the issues at hand. His humor, warmth, compassion, and concern for patients and colleagues make him a role model for us all. —Marvin Stone



Figure. Zeck Lieberman, MD.

Zeck exudes unbridled enthusiasm for medicine and for life, which he transmits to everyone he meets. He creates tremendous excitement. He transcends surgery and even medicine. —Charles Richardson

He is unbelievably diligent and a pleasure to deal with. —Kent Hamilton

He has a unique ability to overcome the egos of other physicians and get them to work together for the benefit of patients. He promotes the team concept, and our cancer centers of excellence would not have been possible without his leadership. —Bob Parks

When Zeck would come to the radiology department whistling and with his huge stack of outside films for review, it was always about the best possible patient care. It was never about him. His enthusiasm was contagious. More than a teacher, he is a mentor to those around him. —Herb Steinbach

Zeck is unique in his ability to incorporate multiple people and their opinions in decision making. Whether it is a decision about patient management or an important hospital issue, he seeks input from many and makes one feel valued as part of the team and the process. He epitomizes the adage "There is no limit to what can be accomplished as long as you don't care who gets the credit." —Pick Scruggs

What makes Zeck unique is his impeccable surgical technique, unsurpassed clinical judgment, unbridled and infectious enthusiasm about medicine, undying dedication to Baylor, and especially his mentoring and encouragement of students, residents, and junior staff. —Bob Mennel

Zeck loves the practice of surgery. He has an unusual equanimity (evenness of spirit), especially under stress. He taught me a lot about surgical technique—and even more about the art of surgery. —John O'Brien

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Zeck is a great communicator, and he believes in dialogue. He knows that the problems of his patients are best solved by getting to know them from all possible angles. He has the most positive attitude I have ever seen in anybody and never fails to lift the spirits of everybody around him. My wife, Marta, thinks he is *so* good looking, and analytically that is the most likely reason for his great success. —Dan Savino

I think these characterizations are highly perceptive and accurate, but I believe they are mainly reflections of an underlying force. I was not able to glean from them the root cause of Zeck's greatness. This was a valuable exercise, however, because whatever primary essence we ultimately propose will need to explain these manifestations and personality traits, except perhaps his good looks.

The next step was to study the literature on the philosophy of surgery. I read that the word *surgeon* comes from the Greek word *cheirourgia*, which means working with the hands. Surgery itself is defined as the skill of using one's hands with special instruments to cure disease and prolong life. To operate well requires the ability to "see with the fingers" in order to reconstruct three-dimensional anatomy. It requires complex movements of both hands to expose, remove, manipulate, and repair injured or diseased tissues. Although these technical skills are absolutely essential, they are not sufficient to make a great surgeon. Highly skilled operators can be poor surgeons (1).

The second requirement is judgment, which must be based on practical experience plus thorough knowledge of the scientific medical literature—when to operate, when not to operate; when to stop, when not to stop.

Even this is not enough to make a great surgeon. The final requirement was probably first enunciated by Rudolph Matas, who was chief of surgery at Tulane in the early 1900s, up until 1927 (2). Osler called Matas the father of vascular surgery. He did his final operation in 1946, when Zeck was a student at Tulane and Matas was 86 years old.

In May of 1915, Matas was invited to speak at the 48th Convention of the Mississippi State Medical Association in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The title of his talk was "The Soul of the Surgeon" (3). Since words can have different meanings, I need to define what Matas meant by the word *soul*. He meant the moral force and the emotional fervor of the surgeon. Matas chose this subject in part because he was upset by George Bernard Shaw's unflattering portrayal of surgeons in his play *The Doctor's Dilemma*, which was first produced in 1906.

Matas' speech in 1915 created interest and excitement rarely equaled by a medical address. Some now regard it as the most important surgical address ever given (4). It was a long speech, and I can give only a brief summary. Matas said:

The soul of a surgeon remains ever faithful and quick to the call of pain, and nothing can ever tarnish the purity of his motives. When all goes well, the [surgeon's] relief is immeasurable. But after each tragedy comes the merciless self imposed cross examination, in which the surgeon stands before the bar of his own conscience. Yet he loves being a surgeon.

Willingness to respond to the call of pain and purity of motive are certainly typical of Zeck, but they are also found in many other surgeons who do not achieve his greatness. Although I did not find the answer to my quest in "The Soul of the Surgeon," I did decide that the source of Zeck's greatness probably emanates from his moral force and emotional fervor, which Matas would call his soul.

So the search continued. Neither Marvin nor I could think of anything that William Osler wrote that would explain Zeck's force. Then we remembered Francis W. Peabody (5–11), one of the chiefs of medicine at Harvard, who I believe comes the closest to explaining the root source of Zeck Lieberman's greatness.

Peabody gave an address at Harvard Medical School in 1926 entitled "The Care of the Patient" (5). His thesis was that the essence of the practice of medicine is intensely personal, and that in many cases both diagnosis and treatment are directly dependent on an intimate relationship between the patient and his or her physician. However, in Peabody's opinion, the management of patients in the hospital is often impersonal, which in some cases results in inappropriate diagnosis, treatment, and care. Moreover, since most student and housestaff teaching takes place in the hospital, students and young doctors learn to focus on diseases rather than on patients.

The main conclusion of Peabody's speech was that the treatment of a disease may be entirely impersonal but that the care of a patient must be completely personal. The good physician knows his patients through and through, and his knowledge is bought dearly because time, sympathy, and understanding must be lavishly dispensed. But the reward is to be found in the personal bond, which forms the greatest satisfaction of the practice of medicine. Peabody finished with these memorable lines: "One of the essential qualities of the physician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient" (5).

At the time of his address, Peabody had recently been diagnosed with an inoperable leiomyosarcoma of the stomach (8–10). He was only 47 years old. Peabody's wife and son were in the audience, and Peabody said to his wife: "I am absolutely sure that this little lecture will be remembered long after anything of a scientific nature I have written has been forgotten." There is no doubt that this was a correct assessment, as is very clear from his biography (10). There is also no doubt that Peabody shared many personality characteristics with Zeck Lieberman: "Great in wisdom, he was tolerant; strong, he was patient of weakness; rich in gifts and honors, he was without pride" (11).

Could enormous interest in humanity explain all or most of Zeck's characteristics that were expounded earlier? First, we must try to understand what Peabody meant by *humanity*. From the dictionary and by intuition, I think he meant concern for human welfare and a way of life centered on a philosophy that asserts the dignity and worth of all men and women. Using this definition, I think intense interest in humanity could explain Zeck's greatness. For example, it could explain why he prepares for surgery so diligently, why he personally speaks to the pathologist, radiologist, and referring

doctor, and why in difficult cases he sometimes asks surgeons from Baylor or from other institutions to assist him. It could explain his multidisciplinary approach, because best treatment often requires coordinated care by different specialists. It could explain his somewhat unusual concern for the welfare and success of other doctors. Perhaps his enthusiasm comes from the knowledge and confidence that his careful preparation will provide the best chance for a good result. In Zeck's case, the power of "the universal language of enthusiasm" (12) cannot be overstated. His extraordinary personal rapport with his patients will guarantee that his patients and their families are well prepared. Their satisfaction will give him a positive attitude.

According to Dr. Joseph Pratt, who was in the audience, Peabody's lecture was not met with any unusual approval (8, 9). In a few minutes the lecture hall was empty. Perhaps the audience thought it was too sentimental, impractical, or not scientific enough. Possibly they had never known a physician with a full-time and busy private practice who could bring such humanity into the hospital. Peabody himself was an outstanding teacher, administrator, and researcher, but he had only a small private practice. But Baylor has seen the powerful results of Zeck's intense personal relationship with his many patients in the hospital and with his many colleagues. These relationships have benefited his patients and have taken him to the zenith of his profession. We at Baylor, above all others, would know that this manner of caring for patients is not sentimental, impractical, or unscientific.

Of course, many doctors develop an intense personal relationship with their patients, but not many do it as consistently and to such effect as Zeck Lieberman. In this regard, Pick Scruggs quoted Bum Phillips, who once said this about Earl Campbell: "He may not be the only one, but it don't take long to call the roll."

I hope we will be able to perpetuate Zeck Lieberman's legacy of humanity within Baylor University Medical Center. It will be hard to do because modern technology and the perceived need for increased productivity create barriers to a close personal relationship between patients and their doctor within

the hospital. Moreover, hospitals are being judged by what can easily be measured, rather than by the personal attention patients receive from their doctor. At least the current students, residents, and young physicians at Baylor will be able to tell their children and grandchildren that they once knew a doctor who developed an intense personal relationship with his patients and that he was richly rewarded by respect from his colleagues and love from his patients.

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