

Founder's Award Dinner
May 16, 2011
Denver, CO

In Honor of Dr. Robert Mellins

Dan M. Cooper MD

Bob,

I am truly honored to have been asked to say a few words about you, your mentorship, and our sustained friendship and collegiality that has lasted uninterrupted for 33 years!

Now, we have already heard about what a wonderful teacher, investigator, physician, and scholar Bob is! So, I feel obligated to speak of the "darker" side of Dr. Mellins. You will notice that no one has spoken of Bob's jokes or wit or humor...sadly, as we discovered so many years ago, Bob simply has no sense of humor. As a fellow, no one ever would say, "Hey, did you hear Bob's latest joke?" Never!

Well, almost never. There is one joke, one, that Bob told me. This is a true story...now, over 30 years later, I have been given permission to tell that joke and expose Bob's darker, humorous, side!

It was at the ATS meeting in 1980. The hot topic that year was high-frequency ventilation. No one really understand how it was possible that a ventilator strategy that involved rapid oscillating pulses whose volume was far less than a baby's deadspace could possibly result in gas exchange. It simply defied the alveolar gas equation!

So after one particularly scientifically dense session on possible limitations and side effect of high frequency ventilation, Bob and I left the lectures thoughtful and perplexed. As we were leaving, Bob said to me, "Well, Dan, one thing I know. In about 30 years, you are going to have a patient say to you...'hiiiiiiiiiii, I-i-i-i- sur-sur-sur-vived-vived -vived hi-hi-hi- freq-freq-freq uency-ucency-ucency vent-vent-ventilation-ilation-ilation when-when-when I-I-I was-was-was a-a-a ba-ba-ba-by-by-by!"

It was the only joke I ever heard from Bob. Of course, it was witty and related to pediatric pulmonology! I knew I best not forget it.

I can only echo all of the wonderful things that have been said about Bob as a mentor for young physicians who were committed to careers in academic medicine. I recall well my first attempt at writing an abstract for the ATS. My original typewritten attempt came back unrecognizable. Bob's scratchings were everywhere with lines and arrows directing me to the back of the page where lovely new paragraphs and interpretations and questions urged me to think deeper, analyze better, write more cogently.

At the end of Bob's comments was the sentence, "Dan, you are flexing your muscles, but not quite lifting the weights!"

Later, Bob confided in me that this pithy phrase actually came from his mentor, the late great physician scientist, Al Fishman. It is a great phrase, and, alas, describes so many of our efforts in the complex world of translational science.

Bob, as I look out at this wonderful crowd gathered here this evening to honor you, and as we all realize the great success of so many of your trainees who themselves are now leaders in this and other fields and are continuing your legacy of mentorship, one thing becomes crystal clear---in your life, you have truly, "lifted the weights."