

Dr. Heather Zar Tribute to Dr. Mellins

It's a great privilege to have been asked to say a few words in honour of Dr Mellins this evening. I first met Bob in 1991 when I joined the Pediatric Pulmonology Division at Columbia as a fellow at Babies and Childrens Hospital of New York where I spent 3 years as a fellow, after which I returned to South Africa. This was the beginning of a wonderful relationship with Dr Mellins, firstly as a teacher and mentor and then as a friend and colleague.

My first memory of Bob is from my first day of fellowship when he invited me to join him in his clinic seeing his patients. I remember being struck by his amazing empathy, gentleness and skill – a great example for anyone thinking of a career in Pediatric Pulmonology. As a fellow I came to recognise his superb clinical skills and remarkable ability with parents and children. And of course, he was an inspiring teacher.

But Bob taught me much more than clinical skills and empathy. He taught me a way of approaching academic practice and of critical thinking that I could never have imagined. Entering the fellowship program, I had little knowledge of research, particularly laboratory based work or clinical science. When Bob insisted that I spend time in Alice Prince's and Lisa Saimans lab growing cells and looking at Pseudomonas adherence I was at first horrified – and even thought of quitting. But he was of course right – this turned out to be a wonderful opportunity which enabled me to better understand aspects of basic science, translational research and the importance of integration with clinical sciences. This has had a profound impact on my own practice and thinking.

Now, as a program director and mentor I have renewed awe for the ways in which Bob Mellins sought to develop each particular fellow and the amount of work he put into this. Always careful to consider each fellow's strength and needs, he spent hours thinking about what would be best for each person and lining up potential mentors and projects. He told me that the best fellows kept him the busiest – looking for equipment, support and seeing to their needs. In return, he was uncompromising, demanding the best from each fellow in his gentle way.

As we well know, Bob has been a driving force in the development and advancement of Pediatric Pulmonology. He has made many, wide contributions through clinical leadership, training and teaching, research and advocacy. But his influence has been much larger than his direct contributions and is seen in the many people and structures he has created or influenced. Perhaps his most remarkable quality is his ability to develop and nurture people and his investment in this development of people. To me personally, he continues to be an ongoing, wise and generous mentor. He once told me that he measures himself not by his own success or publications or recognition he has received, but by the people he has mentored and their achievements. His legacy and influence continue through the people he has trained or mentored, from many parts of the world, many of whom are here tonight.

Beyond all his talent, skill and ability, is a man of great integrity and humanity. Robert Mellins for me is a truly outstanding individual who has made an enormous and unique contribution to advancing child lung health globally. It has been a privilege to know and learn from him.