

Irving Heller (1926-2003)

Irving Heller meant many things to many people. He was an exceptionally talented and dutiful doctor to thousands of patients. He was a master clinician and a distinguished professor



for the Montreal Neurological Institute-Hospital and McGill University, where he was also a cherished colleague to his fellow neurologists and professors. Furthermore, he was a highly valued teacher and advisor and mentor of hundreds of students and residents. As well, he was a devoted family man. These are the reasons for which Irving is mourned and missed by multitudes of people who have been

beneficiaries of his travails during a long career. These are the reasons that, in the hall for his memorial service, space was not available for many people. Special mention is to be made about Irving's second career, which he cultivated with fervor and excellence. He became a self-taught scholar of the Old Testament of the Bible, and became a knowledgeable professor in this field at McGill. Another noteworthy item was Irving's special sense of humor and wit, even though it was often sharp and not always flattering to everybody. Irving's humor has led to the survival of several "Hellerisms". One of the more noteworthy of these is the advice that he gave to people with a problem: "Life is a fatal, sexually transmitted disease".

Irving had a rich life, even though he had to defeat, with dignity, several major diseases after his retirement about 15 years ago. He was respected and admired throughout his career and will be missed.

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Letter to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR

Dr. Irving Heller

I was very saddened to hear of the death of Dr. Irving Heller. Dr. Heller was a wonderful and remarkable attending physician at "The Neuro" who taught me during my neurology residency (1979-1982). I recall fondly rounding with Dr. Heller, rounds that would often begin around 9:00 a.m. and last until 2:00 p.m., sometimes punctuated with a quick lunch. Especially memorable were the quips of Dr. Heller, "Hellerisms" as they were called. Unfortunately, I have lost my record of many of these Hellerisms, which I used to write down frequently. Some still remain: "Good health is a transient condition with a poor prognosis." "Surgery is the art of separating a patient from their disease." Some were comments on resident behaviour and decorum. For instance, regarding the habit of many residents and staff members to rest their feet on the bed frame of a patient's bed while on rounds, Heller would say, "Patients do not appreciate mounting behaviour exhibited at their bedside." Regarding being unkempt, he would admonish "Dr. ... did not stand close enough to his razor this morning." Although these witty quips were amusing, they also exposed the desire of Dr. Heller for respectful behaviour towards patients. At times, Dr. Heller's humour could be "on the edge". For instance, for several weeks during my rotation, he said he was convinced that the floor cleaner had a microphone in the floor polisher and was

trying to listen to our rounds. Sure enough, every day for a week or so, as we were rounding on this particular ward, the floor polisher approached us as if it was truly intent on overhearing our conversation. On another occasion, he had a dream that one of the patients on the ward who was in a vegetative state had jumped out the window of her room. That morning we had to take him immediately to see this patient to assure him that this dream was erroneous. At times his humour was caustic. For instance, on one occasion he said that he had bought a lottery ticket and as a result for the first time in his life he had felt an emotion that he believed that religious people called hope. He said he did not win the lottery but, at least in a lottery, as opposed to religion, someone wins. This negative view of religion was perhaps just for effect, as I rarely recall any physician so concerned for doing the right thing, or for correct behaviour. He instituted a lengthy discharge round to determine the discharge planning for each patient on the service, and insisted that no "pending" lab tests be permissible so that, following discharge, no unforeseen surprise results would appear on the chart after it had been signed out. Dr. Heller's rounds were a wonderful mix of anecdote, instruction and wit. It was a great pleasure to have been instructed and entertained by this wonderful physician and human being.

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