Tribute to Zelig H. Lieberman, MD

Colleagues, family, and friends of Dr. Zelig (Zeck) Lieberman gathered at a dinner on September 6, 1997, to honor him for 40 years of service to Baylor University Medical Center. The dinner was hosted by Boone Powell, Jr., president and CEO of the Baylor Health Care System. A surprise announcement was made that the new research building to be constructed on the Baylor campus would be named in honor of Dr. Lieberman.

The Lieberman Research Building, scheduled to open in the fall of 1998, will house the Baylor Institute for Immunology Research. The institute will be dedicated to the study of the body's immune system. The 2-story, 44,500-square-foot building will provide modern laboratories, a research conference center, a library, and offices for faculty and postgraduate students. The building is designed to present a welcoming environment, a place where people can relate, share, and create. Its spirit will engage the inquiring and curious minds of scientists. The facility will accommodate 120 employees and is located on a 4 1/2-acre site at 3434 Live Oak Street.

This is the first time that Baylor has named a building after one of its physicians. The idea to do this came from the medical staff and was heartily endorsed by Baylor's administration and board of trustees. It may be worth listing some of the reasons why Zeck Lieberman is so deserving of this honor. First, he is one of the most distinguished and respected physicians who has ever been on our medical staff. Second, he is a peacemaker. Time and time again he has found a way to mediate disputes and heal emotional wounds among his fellow physicians and among members of Baylor's medical staff, administration, and board of trustees. Third, he is a highly skilled surgeon, and his humanistic qualities and bedside manner are legendary. Fourth, he appreciates and promotes the value of research at Baylor, knowing that improvements in patient care depend first and foremost on progress in medical research. One of the major goals of the Baylor Institute for Immunology Research is to find better methods to treat cancer, and since Zeck's major expertise is the surgical treatment of cancer, it is highly appropriate that his name be associated with this particular research effort. Finally, having Zeck's name on the building will help tremendously in integrating research and the practice of medicine at Baylor.

It is also worth noting that Zeck Lieberman has done all these things while being engaged in private practice. He has never been employed by Baylor or by any other institution. He is living proof of the power of the private practice of medicine when it is done right, which in Zeck's mind means keeping the well-being of his patients as the major goal in his professional life.
Mr. Powell stated, "Dr. Lieberman has made substantial contributions to the development of Baylor University Medical Center through his devotion to his patients and his commitment to quality. He sets a high standard for us all."

Dr. Ronald C. Jones, chief of the Department of Surgery, said, "I have known Dr. Lieberman for 35 years. He is a very sincere and serious person, a no-nonsense individual. He can get to the bottom of a situation, see through it very quickly, and then make some very intelligent and educated recommendations. I think the past 40 years that Dr. Lieberman has been here will be remembered because of the programs in which he has been involved, the oncologic programs and the gastrointestinal programs in particular, and his relationship with people who will be here for another generation. He has affected many lives in this institution, and I think he will be quoted many times in the years to come."

Dr. Howard Derrick, surgeon and partner, noted Zeck's impact as a teacher: "Zeck has been practicing surgery at Baylor University Medical Center for 40 years. He's taught hundreds of surgery residents during that time, and over half of the general surgeons currently on staff at Baylor have been trained under his watchful eye. He has definitely stimulated my interest in surgical oncology, and as a result of Dr. Lieberman's influence, Dr. John Preskitt completed an oncology fellowship at M. D. Anderson Hospital before returning to Baylor. He also influenced several other graduates of our surgery residency program to enter the field of surgical oncology. Every year, Baylor is ranked as one of the best hospitals in the country. Oncology receives special recognition as a center of excellence."

Dr. John Preskitt, another partner, spoke of a different kind of influence: "Zeck and I are proud of our respective religions. Neither of us is Baptist, but we both enjoy worshiping the same God and discussing it. I once said to Zeck, 'You know, we all worship the same God, but it's like we use different answering services.' I remember that wise and yet perplexed took that he gave me, and I think he said, 'Well, that may be true, John. I'd have to think about that. But in the meantime, make sure you keep your beeper on day and night just in case He calls.' And come to think of it, he hasn't let me turn it off since."

Dr. J. Harold Cheek, a longtime friend and fellow surgeon, said, "Some of the greatest technicians are not necessarily the best surgeons, because the best surgeons to me are the ones who are skilled and who have feelings in their heart for patients and colleagues. They give of themselves to their patients. That's what makes Zeck a special surgeon. As far as I'm concerned, he's the top of the line. I've known no other person who has the qualities that Zeck Lieberman has in terms of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's one of the reasons why I've respected him so much and why he is a very special friend."

Fred Roach, president of Baylor's Leadership Center, offered these thoughts: "I don't know of anybody who personifies the idea of the Baylor family better than Zeck Lieberman. He talks about his own personal family; he talks about the Baylor family. When he's in the midst of the Baylor family, any part of it, at a board meeting with the trustees, with fellow physicians, with administrative people, or informally meeting in the hallway, it's evident that he relates to everyone as a family member."
Chip Moody, WFAA-TV news anchor, provided a different perspective: "As a patient at Baylor, I always knew Dr. Lieberman was coining because he'd whistle a lot. He whistles before he comes into the room and he instantly puts you at ease. He's very straightforward but friendly. He'll lay out the facts on the table. I had no qualms about having an operation because I knew he was at the head of the team that was doing the operating. He represents a quality of doctor that is all too rare. It's hard to put into words because he does it so deftly. Something comes together—his mannerisms, his speech, his thought patterns, how he addresses you, how he talks to you, how he answers your questions -- that rare combination sets him apart."

Liener Temerlin is chairing the Baylor Health Care System Foundation's campaign to raise $10 million for the first phase of the Lieberman Research Building. He is chairman of the board for TEMERTIN McClain Public Relations and a patient and friend of Dr. Lieberman. Mr. Temerlin made these comments: "Zeck is, in the final analysis, the doctor's doctor. Zeck is the ideal to which others measure themselves in all of the disciplines of the medical profession. Yet, here is a man who is not afraid to ask for and to seek the wisdom of others. The only thing that matters to Zeck is what is best for his fellow man."

Another facet of Zeck's life was reflected upon by Rabbi Gerald J. Klein: "One thing about Zeck Lieberman is that he has not really changed. I don't even think he looks much different from when I first saw him 40 years ago. But his quiet, decent, human approach has never changed. In Jewish circles we use the term mentsh, which means a gentleman and an individual par excellence. Zeck Lieberman is a mentsh. Zeck is a practical person and an ardent, good member of the Temple Emanu-El. Whether he knows it or not, he follows a good, old Jewish teaching, and that is, live one world at a time. Judaism is a this-world religion. You do as much as you can in this world and the other world will take care of itself. And when you add up the record of Dr. Lieberman and all the people that he has served and the institutions that he has lifted to great heights, I'm not worried about his reward in the hereafter. I'm just grateful for what he did in this world."

—JOHN S. FORDTRAN and MICHAEL A. E. RAMSAY