

## **HISTORY OF PEDIATRIC RHEUMATOLOGY SERIES**

A tribute to a mentor: Jerry Charles Jacobs,  
M.D

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## **Introduction**

The history of pediatric rheumatology as a distinct specialty is relatively brief, having only started as a sub-specialty in its own right less than 50 years ago, but it has been full of many brilliant and colorful individuals who were responsible for its initial development and eventual success. Those who are familiar with this cast of characters would agree that there were few who were more colorful and insightful than Jerry C. Jacobs, M.D.

Jerry was a fiercely independent, outspoken and controversial figure who never failed to evoke strong emotions from everyone he encountered. He had a great many admirers, including patients who would do absolutely anything he asked, but there were also many who could not get past his brash and sometimes difficult personality. He was not a large man, yet he had an unmistakable physical and mental presence. As Dr. Charles Christian, Jerry's mentor in rheumatology, recalls: "Jerry Jacobs was unique in many ways...(his) cadence of speaking, motor activities, distinctive gait; I remember being in Paris 25 years ago, seeing a man and a woman walking a couple of hundred yards ahead and knowing instantly that the man was Jerry..."

Jerry's unique and colorful personality made quite an impression in the field of pediatric rheumatology, but in addition, Jerry will also be remembered for his clinical acumen, encyclopedic knowledge, superlative teaching, and mentoring. He was also a steadfast advocate for children with rheumatic diseases, who left no stone unturned to enable his patients to live as normal a life as possible.

## **The Early Years**

Jerry C. Jacobs was born on the island of Manhattan on March 8, 1931. His father was a lawyer, and although the family was initially well off, the Depression quickly changed their financial situation. Eventually the family moved to West 115<sup>th</sup> Street, near Columbia University, an area from which Jerry never strayed very far. His entire academic career following High School, save one year of internship spent at New York University, was spent on the two campuses

of Columbia University, between 114<sup>th</sup> and 168<sup>th</sup> Streets, on the West Side of Manhattan in New York City.

Jerry attended the Bronx High School of Science, the premier public high school for academically talented students in New York City, where he was elected president of the student body. As a senior, he was selected by the Telluride Foundation as one of 2 boys nationally to receive a 4 year scholarship to attend Cornell University. There was one hitch though: Jerry was Jewish. Cornell had already filled its “Jewish quota,” and so despite his scholarship, Jerry was not accepted for enrollment. Jerry attended Columbia College instead, where in 1950, as a junior attending a Freshman Tea, he met a Barnard College freshman named Isabel Fenster, who eventually became his life partner and soul mate. Theirs was a true and enduring union; Jerry spoke of Isabel often and one could see in his bright brown eyes how much he cared for her (and later their family.) He graduated from Columbia in 1952, and went on to medical school at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Isabel and Jerry were married in April of 1954 during the one week of vacation Jerry had as a second year medical student.

While completing his one and only year of medical training away from Columbia at Bellevue Hospital/New York University, Jerry became infamous for his efforts against using babies for nutritional studies without their parents’ informed consents. NYU was then a pioneer in infant nutrition, championing the need for special formulas and recognizing diet as a life-saving intervention. However, the early studies in Maple Syrup Urine Disease and other conditions of abnormal amino acid metabolism were designed by investigators who did not have to answer to Institutional Review Boards or consider the ethics of such interventions. The interns working at the Bellevue Hospital were the ones who drew blood from these babies and administered the formulas, but Jerry simply and quite vocally refused to participate. For many years, pediatric residents at NYU recounted this story as a legend and considered Jerry a man ahead of his times.

## **The Beginning of a Career in Rheumatology**

Jerry's fascination with rheumatology was sparked by his exposure as a medical student and pediatric resident to Dr. Charles A. Ragan, Jr., the director of the rheumatology training program at Columbia University. At the time, there were literally no more than a handful of pediatric rheumatologists in the world, and so Jerry quickly recognized this as an area of need and special opportunity. In particular, Hattie Alexander, his pediatric preceptor and pioneer in pediatric infectious diseases, recognized his special intelligence and energy and greatly encouraged him to pursue training in rheumatology. After finishing his pediatric residency, Jerry served in the Army under the Berry Act. As a result, he, Isabel and their now growing family (Debbie was born in 1956, Daniel in 1958, and eventually Paul in 1960) went to live in Germany from 1959 to 1961. On a MedEvac trip back to the States, he went to see Dr. Ragan about pursuing training in rheumatology, and was accepted.

When they moved back to New York in 1961 to begin his fellowship, Jerry was distressed to discover that Dr. Ragan was on his way to direct the Department of Medicine at the Columbia division of Bellevue Hospital. Dr. Ragan reassured him that he had hired a bright and talented young man to take his place. This turned out to be Dr. Charles Christian, who became the director of the Edward Daniels Faulkner Arthritis Clinic and Jerry's mentor. As Jerry states in the dedication to his book, *Rheumatology for the Practitioner* (1), Dr. Christian provided his "training and inspiration." Dr. Christian recalls that it was very quickly evident that Jerry was quite outspoken: "Jerry (and his) group of fellows were all New Yorkers: rounds, conferences, informal discussions, everything tended to be noisy, (and) it was never dull." He was also struck by Jerry's extraordinary abilities as a clinician: "Early in his career (Jerry) demonstrated a natural talent as a clinical sleuth, for recognizing important clues by instinct and pattern recognition; this talent, along with high energy and intelligence, were the ingredients in his outstanding record as an academic physician and teacher."

After finishing his training, Jerry was faced with the monumental task of interpreting, implementing and molding what he had learned about adult

rheumatology in order to take care of children. (Editor's Note: Dr. Jacobs completed an adult rheumatology fellowship as pediatric rheumatology fellowships were not available then.) This he did with extraordinary skill and insight. He understood with exceptional clarity that rheumatic diseases in children were not the same as in adults, particularly regarding their impact on both the physical and emotional growth of children. He, along with the handful of others in the field at the time, therefore began to construct the foundation of the sub-specialty that exists today.

Because there was no paid position for a pediatric rheumatologist at Columbia Babies Hospital, Jerry was unable to afford to be a pediatric rheumatologist full-time. He therefore went into private practice as a general pediatrician and initially saw pediatric rheumatology patients occasionally. His office was located in the sun room of his large (some would say imposing) Spanish-style mansion in Riverdale, a neighborhood in the Bronx. He also volunteered at a half-day pediatric rheumatology clinic held weekly in the midst of the busy adult rheumatology clinic in the old Vanderbilt Building of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. As the years passed and he gained an international reputation in pediatric rheumatology, he saw fewer and fewer general pediatric patients and was able to devote his full attention to pediatric rheumatology, establishing it as a specialty in the New York metropolitan area. Even in the 1990's, however, his fellows would sometimes have to help give a routine immunization to a patient left over from his general pediatric practice.

### **Jerry's Unique Personality**

Over the years, Jerry was invited to give lectures all over the world, which fortunately jived quite well with his and Isabel's passion for travel and adventure. Isabel would always go, as Jerry would never accept an invitation if Isabel's trip was not paid for as well. Jerry would give his talk or do his visiting professorship, and afterwards they would schedule a vacation in some nearby exotic locale. Over the years, they traveled to remote areas of Central America, Morocco, Cambodia, Burma, Syria and Turkey, to name just a few of the places. He

enjoyed good food and wine and was an accomplished gourmet cook who loved to entertain. Although he enjoyed the best hotels and restaurants and did not mind the cost, what Jerry especially enjoyed was negotiating a good bargain. He and Isabel were famous for finding a convoluted but incredibly cheap way to travel somewhere and for eating at fabulous four-star restaurants at a discount. He was also a master storyteller, and sometimes it seemed that he relished the recounting of their adventures almost as much as the actual experience itself.

His patients would often be surprised when they opened the huge creaky wooden front door of his Riverdale office and home to find Dr. Jacobs where the secretary should be sitting, merrily typing his own letters. He felt it was faster for him to type as he thought, rather than dictate a letter that had to be corrected once again. His letters were therefore famous for several things: a stream-of-consciousness writing style, the characters which would leap up off the line here and there because of his quirky old typewriter, and his signature, which was always in green fountain pen ink. He loved the fact that whenever he critiqued a paper for a peer-reviewed journal, his typewriter would give him away and the author would know who had provided the most challenging comments and requested the most changes.

Jerry's strong personality was not universally liked. He never hesitated to give his opinion, even if it meant that others might take offense. He could be stubborn to the point of being inflexible. But he also used his personality to be a fierce advocate for his patients, and for this, he was feared by housestaff and colleagues alike. One Babies ex-resident recalls that one of the proudest accomplishments of his residency was "successfully avoiding being yelled at by Jerry Jacobs." The mother of a severely affected child with systemic JRA remembers calling Jerry on a Friday morning when her son became very ill with fever and shortness of breath. Dr. Jacobs was out on Eastern Long Island where he loved to spend many summer weekends, but his car was being towed for repairs as they spoke. He told her to take him immediately to the Babies Hospital Emergency Room. They waited there for hours, while little happened. Suddenly, there was a great commotion, and there were whisperings of "He's here!" and

“It’s him!” Jerry had taken the train (which took several hours) from Long Island. Everyone sprang into action, as Jerry took charge, shouting orders, and doing exactly what needed to be done.

## **Achievements**

There is little question that Jerry’s *Textbook of Pediatric Rheumatology for the Practitioner*, first published in 1982, was the best clinically oriented text ever written on the subject by one person (1). It is so well written and pertinent that it is still used today even though it has been out of print for years. The bright blue covers of many a copy are tattered and falling apart: the tell-tale signs of being well loved and used. It was a monumental achievement, especially for a single person to write and organize in the pre-computer era, and a testament to his desire to impart the practical clinical knowledge and skill he had acquired over the years. Jerry had no idea of the impact his one-man book had on scores of students and physicians until very late in his life, when those who were beneficiaries of his teaching wrote to him before he died.

To his colleagues, Jerry was famous for his unique clinical style. His clinical acumen was second to none, and his knowledge of diseases both common and obscure was encyclopedic (witness the “Differential Diagnosis of Arthritis” chapter in his book). Dr. Christian writes: “He published the first study of drug-induced lupus in the pediatric literature (2); he was the first to recognize an unusual familial arthropathy which ought to be called Jacobs’ disease (3, 4) [and later published by Balu Athreya (5)] and he was among the first outside Japan to add to the definition and treatment of Kawasaki disease (6, 7, 8, 9).” Jerry also published the initial report of the streaking leukocyte factor syndrome (10). He was one of several investigators to initially support the genetic association in pauciarticular JRA and uveitis (11), as well as to describe the clinical spectrum of spondyloarthritis in childhood with emphasis on enthesopathy (12). He also pioneered the use of high-dose alternate-dose steroids in the treatment of rheumatic diseases, and although he never published this except in his textbook, some of his fellows did posthumously (13). Most of all, he was a

fabulous diagnostician, able to tease out the diagnoses in the most complex, intricate and puzzling cases. Patients traveled from all over the world to see him.

Aside from his clinical skills, one of Jerry's gifts to the field of pediatric rheumatology was his insistence on improving the quality of life for children with chronic and disabling conditions. One of his most important messages to these children was to seize the day and live as normal a life as possible. He let kids with arthritis participate in whatever sports they wanted and cheered them on, refusing to allow disability to ruin their childhood. The last chapter in his book, "The Power of Positive Thinking," is proof of how strongly he felt about this philosophy and attitude. In a way, his own house was a testament to this approach to his patients. Anyone who went to see Jerry was astounded to discover that the house had to be approached on foot up a long steep driveway, after which one had to ascend a flight of stairs to get to the front door. He was proud to state (rather truthfully) that almost none of his patients needed wheelchairs.

### **Jerry as a Mentor**

Because Jerry was never salaried as a faculty member and he had to make his living exclusively as a private practitioner, he did not have the opportunity to train fellows until rather late in his career. When Ilona Szer, who is now the Director of Pediatric Rheumatology at the Children's Hospital in San Diego, wanted to train in pediatric rheumatology in New York City in 1982, there was no clinical fellowship program available. Robert Winchester, then at the Hospital for Joint Diseases, sent Ilona to speak to Jerry about providing her with the clinical training. She had never met Jerry and so fortunately had no idea of his difficult and demanding reputation. Jerry agreed under two conditions: one, he would not be responsible for her salary, and two, the clinical year would be the last year of her fellowship. This is because Jerry was adamant about rigorous training in bench research and feared that his first fellow would not continue for the full three years if enchanted by clinical rheumatology. Ilona agreed to these demands and therefore became his first fellow.

Yuki Kimura, who is now the Chief of Pediatric Rheumatology at the Children's Hospital at Hackensack University Medical Center, was an intern while Ilona was doing her fellowship. From watching Ilona, Yuki learned not only that one could actually do a fellowship in this fascinating specialty, but that one could survive one with Jerry Jacobs and still be smiling in the end. Many attending pediatricians at Babies Hospital warned Yuki that she was making a grave mistake. Unbeknownst to them, however, Jerry was neither intimidating nor difficult to his fellows, but rather a nurturing mentor who had extremely high, but not unreasonable, expectations. Ilona and Yuki were quickly followed by Suzanne Li (now also an attending pediatric rheumatologist at Hackensack University Medical Center), Lisa Imundo (now the Director of Pediatric Rheumatology at the Children's Hospital of New York, the former Babies Hospital), and Karin Peterson (who finished her fellowship with Tom Lehman after Jerry passed away in the midst of her training, and is now also an attending pediatric rheumatologist at the Children's Hospital of New York).

One unfortunate result of being a solo private practitioner was that Jerry had no appreciation for the benefits of working with a multi-disciplinary team. He was a one-man show, right down to answering his own phone and making his own copies, and he never used nurses in his private office. If nurses were available in the clinic, they were there to take vital signs and weight, not to provide education, review medications or coordinate patient care. Since these concepts were foreign to Jerry, his fellows had to learn them after fellowship. Jerry's accomplishment in teaching was to masterfully impart to his fellows the invaluable ability to recognize, diagnose and treat the very ill children entrusted to our care. He always knew immediately when a patient was ill. Once during a busy office day, he happened to peer into the waiting room and spotted a patient with recently diagnosed lupus waiting for her appointment. He suddenly ran toward her, yelling for a gurney. No one had ever seen him move so fast. By the time he reached the emergency department down the hall, she was in septic shock and needing resuscitation.

Clinical training with Jerry was outstanding, albeit unique. His fellows had to literally run to keep up with him, and while there was never any time for lunch or even coffee, there was always time for a long argument with the radiologist or an interesting story about his travels. The fellow became an extension of Jerry and the one who communicated with the housestaff and provided much of the teaching. His fellows worked exceedingly hard but enjoyed his caring and gentle approach to teaching pediatric rheumatology. By the end, he had become a sort of medical father to each of his fellows, and this relationship continued beyond the training years. He was always available to each of his ex-fellows whether she had clinical questions or personal crises.

### **A last story**

A few weeks before Jerry died at the age of 66, he and Isabel invited three former fellows who lived in the New York area to dinner at their beach house in the Hamptons. He had come home from the hospital earlier in the summer to spend what would be the final days of his battle with cancer. Because he continued to have a partial intestinal obstruction, he was only able to consume liquids. Although each of us approached his house with some trepidation, when he opened the door, he looked like his old self, and seemed as vibrant and energetic as ever. As usual, he was a gracious host, making special hors d'oeuvres by the pool, regaling us with funny stories, and showing us the newly renovated house. He asked one of us to go with him to buy the seafood for dinner. Once at the fish market, he was shown the lobsters that had been reserved for him. After one look, he became outraged: the lobsters were (1) too small and (2) too expensive. He elbowed his way to the back, where he triumphantly found the owner and the "better" lobsters hidden away. He of course persuaded the poor man to sell these at a discount. Once at home, he proceeded to conjure up the most delicious summer supper on which we all feasted, though all he could consume was the broth from the lobster (and some wine). Even so, he seemed exceedingly content and truly happy to be able to treat his former fellows to this wonderful dinner, and never once showed a trace

of bitterness or regret. Here was proof that Jerry lived what he had always preached to his young patients: live life to the fullest, don't be handicapped or consumed by illness, and never, ever have any regrets. This was Jerry's legacy to those fortunate enough to have been able to learn from this unique and extraordinary individual.

We honor Jerry's memory. He was not only a unique person and a pioneer in pediatric rheumatology, but a wonderful teacher and mentor, a terrific clinician and diagnostician, and a ferocious advocate for children with rheumatologic illnesses.

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