NEUROLOGIST AND EDUCATOR

Former Chair of Neurology, Columbia P&S - NINY

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Saul R. Korey, M.D.: A personal tribute

It is a great privilege for me to join in this tribute to Saul Korey, 47 years after his death. It gives me an opportunity to describe how much he influenced my life and how much he influenced the history of neurology. Obituaries published soon after he died paid appropriate homage in a more formal way. \(^1\) \(^2\) \(^3\) \(^4\)

Those early obituaries painted a picture of a highly productive clinical scientist and his research, a man in a hurry. He reportedly slept five hours a night. His daytime activities were so packed it seems that he knew presciently that death would come prematurely. He died of pancreatic carcinoma after four months of symptoms. He was 45 years old.

Saul grew up in New York City, went to Cornell University from 1933-35 and seems to have left without an undergraduate degree. He chose the University of Western Ontario for medical school because the accelerated program there promised an M.D. degree after the sophomore year. After an internship for two years, he enrolled in the Coast Guard for military service from 1942-46. Patrolling the Atlantic Ocean in those days was serious business because of the hazards posed by hostile German submarines. He started training in Neurology at the New York Neurological Institute in 1946 and became Chief Resident from 1947-48; he served under both Tracy Putnam and Houston Merritt. From 1948 to 1951, he was a research Fellow in biochemistry with David Nachmansohn at Columbia. Then he spent a fourth biochemical year with Nobelist Severo Ochoa at New York University. Few other neuroscientists of his age combined such sophisticated training and clinical work as well.

Korey himself was concerned about the problem faced by clinical investigators then and now – how to concentrate primarily on the laboratory and yet maintain clinical skills. Saul Korey asked two residents, Robert Fishman and me, to help him initiate this dual goal. Every Saturday morning we prepared patients for him to examine and discuss.
So began my friendship with him when I started my residency in 1950, a friendship that had lasting consequences.

First, he asked me to proof-read a monograph he wrote on pituitary tumors.\textsuperscript{5} That was done in the dining area of his department in the Bronx and under the supervision of Mrs. Korey, Doris. The monograph was published in 1953, a year after he had been appointed Associate Professor of Neurology and Chief of the Division of Neurology at the Case Western Reserve School of Medicine. That arrangement did not last long. By 1955, he and Irving London had created the first faculty for Albert Einstein College of Medicine, propelling that new school immediately into the top ranks of American medical education. London, like Korey, had also been trained in biochemistry and was an expert on hemoglobin.

Saul invited me to join his new faculty, which was a lure to other friends who had trained at the Neurological Institute. He asked me to be the administrator for a new grant he was expecting and which proved to be another historic first for him. He had put together a team of electron microscopists (then a new technique), led by Robert Terry. Another key appointment was Kunihiko Suzuki, a lipid biochemist. This multidisciplinary approach was applied to Tay-Sachs disease, a terrible familial brain disease of children. This novel concept for research on a human disease proved attractive to committees funding research supported by the National Institutes of Health. The multidisciplinary approach was then called a Clinical Research Center, now a “Program Project.”

In 1954, when Saul began recruiting faculty for Einstein, I was working in a junior position at Montefiore Hospital which, at that time, was affiliated with Columbia University. All faculty appointments at Montefiore also carried an appointment at Columbia. I had no training in biochemistry and only had vague ideas about doing research on Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a lethal disease of young boys. Saul invited me to be the administrator of his program project. He said he would keep administrative tasks to a minimum. In return, he would teach me biochemistry.

These events took place long before the tools of molecular genetics could be applied to human disease. At that time, research on hereditary diseases had to incorporate biochemistry.
One Friday evening, I called my chief at Columbia, Houston Merritt, to ask him what he thought of this idea. In his typical nondirective psychotherapeutic approach, he would grunt in reply to any question I posed. His answers were neither “yes” nor “no”. I told him I had a deadline and would have to reply to Dr. Korey by the following Monday.

Monday came and I was about to accept Korey’s offer. I called Merritt to tell him what I was doing. He said, “No, don’t do that! I will be certain to match any offer he is making.”

Befuddled, I later asked Merritt what made him change his mind. He said that, at the time of our first conversation, he could not compete with Montefiore Neurology, a hospital service in his own department. By the following Monday, he said, he was free of that constraint because I had already decided to resign my Columbia position.

Well, it all worked out for me and I spent four years in the Biochemistry Department at Columbia, working with Professor David Shemin there, which was sufficient preparation for me to join Robert Fishman in 1961 as Co-Directors of a Clinical Research Center at the Columbia Neurological Institute. Saul Korey and I continued to be good friends.

He had been pivotal in creating a new area of biomedical research, making a major contribution to human genetics by conceiving and leading multidisciplinary research, and creating a major new medical school. Quite some achievements for anyone, especially one who died so young.

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REFERENCES


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