Reflections on Dr. Allan D. Cohen

Donald Farquhar MD SM

Allan Cohen was one of the first faculty colleagues I got to know when I joined the Department of Medicine at Dalhousie as an assistant professor in 1989.

Although my family’s roots were in Nova Scotia, I had grown up and completed my medical residency and fellowship training in London, Ontario, and so I had come to Dal “from away,” as Maritimers say. Everything and everyone about the Department of Medicine – except its then head, Dr. George Carruthers, who, like me was also an expatriate Londoner, and had recruited me – were new. For the first few weeks, I confess that I felt like a “fish out of water.”

Allan quickly made himself known to me, and with his warmth, friendliness, and deep interest in people – particularly young people – he made me feel not only welcome, but special. And so my memories of Allan are among the most precious things I carry with me from my 3 years on faculty at Dal. What I remember most about him are his enthusiasm, his helpfulness, and his unfailingly good cheer.

In those days, Allan, I believe, was in his mid- to late forties and was already a full professor and head of Dalhousie’s Division of Nephrology. I soon learned that in the professional realm, he was an exceedingly accomplished individual, held in high regard by his colleagues both locally and across North America. I also learned that he had been a brilliant student, and, if I’m not mistaken, the gold medallist in his medical school class at Dalhousie.

I learned none of this from Allan himself, of course. Among his many gifts of heart and mind was a certain humility that added to his charm. Allan was always more concerned about others than about himself. And that wide circle of concern encompassed his students, residents, colleagues, family, and, most of all, patients.

My duties as a member of the attending staff of the Victoria General Hospital in Halifax included serving as attending physician in the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) for 2 or 3 months of the year. How well I remember a week when all five of our critically ill, mechanically ventilated patients were suffering from acute renal failure, either as their primary problem or as a complication of the illness that had brought them to us. Allan Cohen was the on-call nephrology consultant at the time, and so was intimately involved in the care of each of those patients.

During that week, we spent so much time interacting with Al – and learning from his clinical wisdom, judgment, and humanity – that it started to feel as if he were a full-fledged member of our MICU team. After a few days, we got it into our heads that we should somehow acknowledge this formally by awarding Al with a mock “certificate of membership” in the MICU staff. One of our residents was adept at computers and, with the help of the old “Harvard Graphics” program, was able to produce a very official looking document, which we all dutifully signed.

About the Author

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When we presented Al with his MICU membership certificate at the end of the week, he seemed, for a moment, at a loss for words. This of course was very unusual for him. But we all smiled and laughed and took pleasure in the moment. And that was that – or so it seemed.

A few weeks later, when we were both off-service, I had occasion to drop by Al’s office for one of our many informal talks. As we chatted, I looked admiringly at the many framed diplomas, fellowship certificates, and awards of merit mounted on the wall behind Al’s desk. Imagine my surprise when my gaze came to rest on our MICU membership certificate, handsomely framed and taking its place among seemingly countless other honours!

I have thought about that moment many times since then. Seeing our made-up mock diploma mounted on Al’s office wall said to me that he had been touched in some way by what we had considered at the time to be just another bit of hospital silliness. Now I believe in retrospect that our team’s gesture that day was more than just silliness. Presenting Al with his honorary MICU membership certificate was, in fact, an expression of our deep affection and respect for him as a colleague and friend. For all his humility, Al sensed this perhaps better than we did, and it is now clear to me that our silly certificate meant something to him. Without necessarily knowing it, I think that, in some small measure, we had repaid him for all that he had given to us and to our patients.

I remember how empty and sad I felt when I learned of Al’s untimely sudden cardiac death, a year or two after I had moved on from Dalhousie. I had lost an esteemed colleague, trusted mentor, and good friend. The poet Galway Kinnell once wrote, “If love had not smiled, we would never grieve.” In and through Allan Cohen’s life, love smiled with great warmth, generosity, and grace!

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