
Zoom On Tribute: Joel J. Nobel, Patient Safety Pioneer



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Joel J. Nobel's career as a physician and patient safety advocate "made hospitals a safer place for everybody," according to Anthony J. Montagnolo, the chief operating officer of the Emergency Care Research Institute (ECRI). Dr. Nobel founded the institute in 1968, committed to evaluating the safety and reliability of medical equipment.

Dr. Nobel died on 13 August at the age of 79 from complications of cancer and diabetes.

Transforming Anger Into Energy

During Dr. Nobel's surgical residency at Presbyterian Hospital in 1968, a malfunctioning hospital defibrillator contributed to the death of a four-year-old patient. Dr. Nobel had repeatedly warned administrators about the device's problems, but no action was taken. He later wrote, "Anger is a great source of energy."

Following the tragedy, Dr. Nobel evaluated 18 manual resuscitators at the hospital, nine of which were found to be ineffective. Unable to find a publisher for his findings, he created the Health Devices Journal. It became a trusted resource in the industry for the evaluation of medical devices and technologies.

ECRI Institute's Influence

Dr. Nobel's son, Joshua, recalled his father's dedication to the ECRI institute. "He decided he could do more good designing and evaluating equipment than as a single physician." The institute now has 400 employees in offices around the world, committed to the topics of patient safety, clinical trial reviews and hospital error reports.

Today, hospitals around the world rely on the data compiled and analysed by ECRI when making decisions about which medical equipment to buy, and which practices and procedures to implement. The institute's evaluation of clinical data are trusted based on its not-for-profit, nongovernmental interests.

Code of Honour

According to colleagues, Dr. Nobel adhered to strict conflict-of-interest standards, refusing to accept funding from medical device manufacturers and pharmaceutical firms. Elliot Sloane, who heads the Center for Healthcare Information, Research, and Policy, recalled Dr. Nobel's commitment to "the nonprofit public good".

"I described him as a modern-day samurai, because he really took the battle very personally and honourably," Sloane said. "He did not see wealth or power as the outcome. He had his own code of honour that really focused on a greater good. He was steadfast to the very end."

Dr. Nobel crossed borders in his educational pursuits. His medical degree from Jefferson Medical College in 1963 was preceded by a master's degree in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania and a bachelor's degree in English from Haverford College in 1956. An avid sailor and pilot, he served on a Navy submarine during the Vietnam War, interrupting a neurosurgical residency.

He is survived by his wife, a daughter and son, a brother and sister, and a granddaughter.

Donations in memory of Dr. Nobel can be made to the American Diabetes Association.

Reference: www.philly.com

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