Frederick C. Blodi M.D. (1917-1996)

Dr. Fred Blodi had a second stroke at about the time of the American Academy of Ophthalmology in Chicago last fall and he died on Oct 30th 1996 without regaining consciousness. Very few of our current residents had a chance to get to know him, because the aphasia and hemiplegia of his 1993 stroke prevented him from coming to our daily morning rounds.

Fred Blodi was in Iowa for 45 years, and I knew him for 35 of those years. His warmth and energy set the tone of the Department. We all worked hard to become better teachers because we admired the enthusiasm, grace and humor that he brought to his teaching. As head of the Department he expected each of us to make a mark in our own subspecialty, and he knew that this required time to read, time to write and time to travel so we could hear what was new and could be seen by others in our field. Somehow, and it seems almost miraculous by today's standards, we were never asked to see more patients or to strive harder to earn more money. There always seemed to be an extra hour in the afternoon during which we could have coffee with a resident or a fellow and draw graphs on paper napkins in an effort to push our projects forward.

How did Fred Blodi, an Austrian, end up in Iowa City? It is a story from the 1940s and it is therefore complicated by World War II. Blodi was raised in Maria Enzersdorf, a village near the town of Mödling on the southern outskirts of Vienna. In 1939, in his last year of medical school at the University of Vienna, he became engaged to a young woman from Mödling named Ottilie with whom he had walked to school as a child.

Otty's mother had re-married and lived in New York and Otty was raised with her aunt and uncle. Soon after the war broke out in September 1939, all medical students were drafted into the German army. Blodi was allowed to complete his medical degree on schedule in 1940, and then trained in ophthalmology under Josef Meller and Josef Böck at the First Eye Clinic of the University of Vienna.

Towards the end of the war, it became very important to some young Austrian doctors to avoid serving in the German army, and they put the following plan into action. One of them would render a colleague unconscious with ether and then break one of his limbs; in due course they would change roles. Fred's contribution was to write a prescription for ether for a friend. He was court-martialed by the Germans and received an eight-year prison sentence. In the remaining months of the war, he was moved from one prison to another. Meanwhile in America, Otty joined the WACs and was assigned
to Europe as an interpreter. She set about trying to find him. At the end of the war Blodi was released from Stein Prison on the Danube and made his way back to Vienna. He and Otty found each other in Vienna and they were married there in 1946. Fred came to America as a ‘war bride’ in 1947.

Supported by a stipend from the World Health Organization, he became a fellow with Algernon Reese at Columbia in New York City. There his locker, alphabetically assigned, was next to that of Alson E. Braley, and Blodi was impressed with Braley’s generosity, affability, and openness. Something about Blodi must have also impressed Braley, because a few years later, as the new head of ophthalmology at Iowa, Braley invited him to join the faculty as an ophthalmic pathologist. In Iowa City Fred and Otty raised two children, Chris and Barbara, who both became ophthalmologists. ‘I think it is some kind of hereditary disease’ he would say, with a smile of wry self deprecation that failed to cover his obvious pride.

Blodi became an associate professor in 1961, professor in 1965, head of the department in 1967, and professor emeritus in 1987. He was the ideal academic physician: a scholar - a recognized expert in ophthalmic pathology, but also a skilled diagnostician, an accomplished surgeon, an effective administrator, a devoted and thoughtful editor and an indefatigable translator of medical books. But above all he was a teacher.

Blodi was enormously energetic, always taking on new tasks and new responsibilities. In the company of his colleagues he liked to brighten the mood with an amusing remark or a cheerful rejoinder. He was slow to take