

Letter to the Editor



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The Genesis of Teaching Human Genetics at Medical Schools

To the Editor:

Encouraged by the recently expressed interest of this journal (*Am. J. Hum. Genet.* 44:160, 1989) in questions of human genetics education, we would like to communicate our experiences with teaching genetics to medical students at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. Since the founding of this medical school in 1955, a course in genetics has been a regular part of the first-year curriculum. As far as we know, this may have been the first formal course in genetics offered as part of a medical curriculum in this country. A course taught here in the first year (1955–56) included topics such as significance of problems of genetics in the study of medicine, principles and methods of genetic analysis in humans, dominant and recessive genes, pleiotropic gene effects, sex-linked defects, heredity and environment in the development of the human fetus, syndromes of human abnormalities and their genetic basis, genetic factors and neurogenesis, dominant and recessive defects of the nervous system in humans, and the genetics of sense-organ abnormalities, blood anomalies, blood groups, skeletal abnormalities, and kidney defects.

In the course of years, organization and content of the course underwent considerable changes, but its goal remained the same, i.e., to include genetics as an essential part of the training of future physicians. The participation of clinical colleagues in various areas of medicine contributed decisively to the continuous improvement and success of the medical genetics course. Hematologists were responsible for the establishment

of a Human Heredity Clinic at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, with particular emphasis on hematological and metabolic diseases. Later, genetic counseling services were developed and established in the Department of Pediatrics.

It is of great interest to us to read the various contributions, as reported in the January 1989 issue of the *Journal*, concerning the needs and goals of teaching genetics to medical students. We have become aware of the strong role the Albert Einstein College of Medicine has played in pioneering medical genetics teaching and in responding continuously to the need for changes and improvements of the curriculum. Thus, one of the “younger” medical schools in this country has succeeded in contributing most significantly to the genetics training of future physicians and medical research scientists.

It might be interesting to speculate about the reasons possibly responsible for the strong role that genetics played in this medical school from the beginning in 1955 and throughout its existence. To a large extent this was due to the vision of the first dean and the first chairman of the Department of Anatomy, who decided on the recruitment of a geneticist to the faculty before the medical school opened, in order to include genetics in the medical school curriculum. This trend continued with the establishment of the Human Heredity Clinic and became a tradition with the creation 25 years ago of a separate Department of Genetics. Thus, basic as well as clinical geneticists were attracted to this medical school, ensuring the continuation of the strong tradition in genetics research as well as teaching.

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