



# Pathology of a Teacher

Robert F.  
**Rohner**

PATHOLOGY, BY DEFINITION, IS THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF the nature of disease, its causes, processes, development, and consequences. Understanding pathology is a critical component of the intellectual foundation for virtually all of medicine. For more than 40 years, Robert F. Rohner, MD '52, HS '56, provided that foundation for hundreds of Upstate Medical University students, helping them develop the skills to diagnose and treat disease as well as become thoughtful and caring physicians.

By all accounts, Dr. Rohner had both an extraordinary gift for teaching as well as for personally connecting with his students. They dedicated countless yearbooks to him, and presented him—for at least 18 consecutive years—with the Philip B. Armstrong Award, given to the basic science teacher who most influenced their lives. In 1988, an endowed professorship in pathology was created in his name.



To diagnose the pathology of his success, we recently caught up with Dr. Rohner, now 76, as well as several of his former students. Things haven't changed much; Rohner's still in rare form. His students are still in awe.

**ROHNER:** I was born in the old Crouse Irving Hospital and have deep roots here in Central New York. My father died suddenly from a coronary when I was in my very early teens and I was fortunate to have a fine university and medical school in the town where I lived. I couldn't have afforded to go anywhere else. I remember the kindness of Bob Greg, MD '34, the physician at Solvay Process, where my father worked. I suppose this was the image of the person that I wanted to become. I never quite made it though; he set a very high standard.

I graduated from medical school at Upstate in 1952 and then interned for a year at St. Joseph's Hospital (where I learned how to be a physician) until I returned to the university for a residency in pathology. Except for a couple of years in the Navy, I worked at Upstate until 1983, although I continued to do volunteer teaching until well into the 1990s.

Why pathology? I think back to a comment made by Leon Berman, MD '33, a man I admired and highly respected. It was in an admission committee meeting when an unconventional applicant, who was very smart, was being considered. Lee said that medicine is such a broad field that no matter what kind of a nut you are you can find a place to do important and valuable work. Well, I am a Type A, Grade A obsessive nut and the precision through the microscope was far more than could be found in clinical medicine back in the 1950's. Besides, I learned in my third year that I wasn't much good at clinical medicine. The carrot of the exactness of pathology and the stick of being a bumbling practitioner made the choice easy for me.



"One of the basic principles of pathology that Dr. Rohner taught us was that 'inflammation causes fibrosis, which leads to contracture.' Knowing that enabled me to figure out my own

diagnosis of interstitial cystitis, start a national foundation, and to work closely with the NIH. Dr. Rohner imparted all the fundamentals to his students, and at the same time, made every student feel special and important."

**Vicki Ratner, MD '84**  
Orthopaedic Surgeon  
San Jose, CA

**ROHNER:** As far as the teaching *sh\*tick*, I did what came naturally. At the time I did my training, medical school was far from a happy experience. When I got to teaching, I tried to remedy that as much as I could.

Physicians are applied scientists and they apply their sciences to alleviating suffering and prolonging life. Many of the full time faculty did not have this perspective and taught their subjects as if they were ends in themselves. The physiologists taught us how to be physiologists, the biochemists how to be biochemists. I have yet to use in 54 years of medical practice the structural formula for ascorbic acid or how to smoke a damned kymograph drum, both of which I took valuable time and effort to learn in 1948.

As I think back on whom I learned the most from in medical school and why, the names that flood back are not faculty members, but residents or young post-doctoral fellows spending a short amount of time in anatomy, physiology, pathology, surgery, and medicine, etc.: Art Vercillo, MD '47, HS '51; Ed Swift, MD '43, HS '47; Charley Brown, MD '46, HS '47; John Duggan, MD '43, HS '46; Al Falcone, MD, HS '50; and Logan Love, MD '45, among others. These are people who were dedicated to the practice

of medicine and, when they taught, it was this applied concept that carried their message. I tried to teach pathology as the basis for medical practice and the people who wanted to be medical practitioners responded.



"The course started with multiple pathologists teaching a two-week introductory course. The instructor I had was from Germany and I couldn't understand a word he said. One after-

noon I went up to the pathology office and Dr. Rohner was the only one there. I told him there was something I didn't understand about what we'd covered. He explained the material, then asked me another question. I told him I didn't know that either. He said 'Al, we have a lot of work to do.' He stopped what he was doing, walked me to the blackboard, and tutored me for an hour-and-a-half over everything I should have learned in those two weeks."

**Albert Tydings, MD '74**  
Obstetrician & Gynecologist  
New Orleans, LA



"Whether he was discussing the tuberculosis in "A Song to Remember," the 1945 film about Frederic Chopin and his love affair with feminist writer George Sand, or some equally fascinating

story about syphilis, cancer, or genetic diseases, he took the cold dry facts out of the textbook and illustrated them with real people in history."

**Robert Hanrahan, MD '72**  
Associate Professor of Pathology  
and Laboratory Medicine  
East Carolina University,  
Brody School of Medicine

**ROHNER:** There is an impossible—actually impossible—amount of factual material to be learned in medical school. I went by the rule that any method of packaging the material in a digestible and retainable form was fair. Some of the more delicate souls occasionally objected to a few of my packages.

Failure, Arrhythmia, Rupture and Thromboembolic phenomena (FART) are some of the complications of myocardial infarction. How else would one remember it? If you are talking to a bunch of nuns you can make it spell RAFT, but nobody would remember that.



“Dr. Rohner was a gifted teacher and raconteur. Graduates of the 1950s, 60s and early 70s, will remember the splendid clinical-pathology conferences with Dr. Samson as the

clinical discussant and Dr. Rohner as the presenting pathologist. Also unforgettable were the ‘Rohnerisms,’ gimmicks Dr. Rohner gave to the second-year class in pathology to enhance memory. ‘The obstruction of the duct of an organ leads to a) cystic dilation of the duct, b) fibrotic degeneration of the parenchyma, c) inflammation, or all three.’”

*Frederick Davey, MD '64*  
Retired Chairman of Pathology  
Upstate Medical University



“Who can forget him growling ‘Black Bowel’ in reference to intestinal infarction or ‘Jelly Belly,’ a vivid picture of an abdomen filled with mucinous carcinoma. We filled the

auditorium to hear him provide all the answers in those wonderful clinical-pathologic conferences. In addition, he was certainly a friend and mentor to us scared sophomore students.”

*Gustave L. Davis, MD '63*  
Clinical Professor of Pathology;  
Professor in Applied Mathematics, Yale University

**ROHNER:** I also believe that I have a personality defect, a hole in my soul that needed to be filled by my role as a teacher in order that I could feel complete and content. I needed the students more than they needed me.

As I grew older the students gradually passed from being my brothers and sisters into becoming my sons and daughters—all close family members. The only difference between them and the biological children my wife and I never had was that I didn't have to pay their tuitions. Now that I am pretty much alone in the world, as far as family goes, they are pillars of my social and emotional support.



“One day in December of my 2nd year, I was walking up the hallway and Dr. Rohner asked me a pathology question about something he hadn't taught our class yet. Surprisingly, I

gave him the right answer. He then invited me to have lunch with him so that we could talk about pathology. I spent the next three months having lunch every day with Rohner. The man simply loved to teach and we loved challenging each other. There was no set assignment and some of the other students thought I was crazy for trying to discuss topics that I hadn't had a chance to prepare for, but Rohner made each session fun. So why am I a pathologist? I guess one reason might be that pathology has always seemed like fun to me and maybe this was because of these Rohner sessions. He always said that he could teach a meatball. In 1970-71, I was the prime “meatball!”

*Gregory Threatte, MD '73*  
Chairman of Pathology  
Upstate Medical University



“Whenever I had attacks of self-confidence, he always seemed to know when to tell me I'd done a good job on something. He just made you want to do well for the sake of science. Here was a guy that knew everything in the world and was excited to teach it to you. Even though he must have taught this stuff over and over he had a true zeal for teaching it. And whatever he taught you stuck forever.”

Here was a guy that knew everything in the world and was excited to teach it to you. Even though he must have taught this stuff over and over he had a true zeal for teaching it. And whatever he taught you stuck forever.”

*Richard Cantor, MD '76, HS '79*  
Associate Professor,  
Emergency Medicine and Pediatrics  
Director, Pediatric Emergency Services  
Upstate Medical University

**ROHNER:** At graduation from medical school two titles are conferred. The first is given by the head of the institution and is the Doctor's degree. The second comes when the graduate is given The Oath. At that instant, before man and God, he or she becomes a physician. I was asked to give The Oath at graduation some 15 times. I think I only did it 12 or 13 times because a couple



of times I thought there were people in the graduating class that I didn't want to make physicians. I look upon being asked to give The Oath as the highest point(s) of my career and second only to my marriage as the proudest accomplishment of my life. I tried to give The Oath with dignity and with an emotional impact that would last a lifetime. I followed a template set up by Leon Berman who delivered The Oath with the impact of Moses coming down from the mountain with the tablets under his arm. (He looked the part in his later years!)

Medicine is indeed a higher calling. People will tell their doctors things that they wouldn't tell their priests in the confessional. We mend bodies and minds and good doctors take a whack at mending souls as well. Teachers do the same.



“Dr. Rohner was constantly asked by the graduating class to administer the Oath of Hippocratis. He clarified the difference between receiving the medical degree and taking

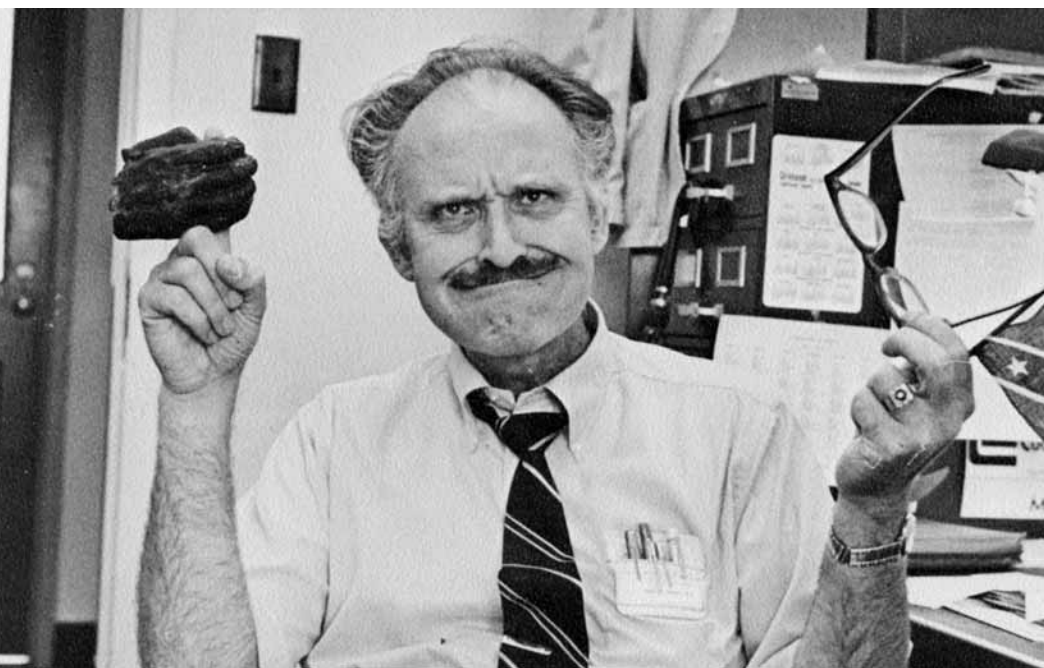
the Hippocratic Oath. The former was given in acknowledgement of learning gained in medical school while the latter was administered to individuals who promised to be physicians, agents of caring. No one can forget the promise made in front of hundreds of family and friends that ‘new physicians,’ would always place concern about patients above all other personal and cultural matters. At that moment in the ceremonies there was hardly a dry eye in the entire auditorium. It was a very powerful message..”

*Frederick Davey, MD '64*  
Retired Chairman of Pathology  
Upstate Medical University

**ROHNER:** Every so often Fritz Parker, MD, (retired chair of Upstate's Department of Surgery) restrings my coronary arteries. The last time was in 1999. I haven't seen a physician professionally since then and will try to avoid doing so in the future. Thankfully, my mind and body do just about all that I ask of them.

I spend my time these days doing a lot of ‘plowing.’ I plow out the driveway in winter, I plow up a quarter-acre or so for a garden in the summer, I plow through the

# Rohnerisms



Thank you, Bob.  
It all began  
with you.

*New England Journal of Medicine* every week, and I am plowing through a prodigious library as I reread old friends before I have to clear them out.

One such old friend, poet Alfred E. Houseman writes in *A Shropshire Lad* about how a person of some repute may have 'the name die before the man' if he lives very long. I was content to let it be so with me, but here we are.



"Dr. Rohner spoke really quickly. Kodachromes would be flying. The blackboard would fill up. It was sometimes hard to keep pace. Cassette tape recorders had just come out

and I started bringing my tape recorder to class to tape his lectures. I still have a few of his lectures from 1971. A few years ago, I came home and found my wife watching a TV show about the resurgence of tuberculosis. I told her I had this great lecture about TB on tape. It was about 11 at night and she

wasn't interested. I said, 'Come on, listen for two minutes and then I'll shut it off.' I put Dr. Rohner's lecture on, and an hour later, she's still up, listening to the entire thing. Even after 20 years, when he spoke, you couldn't help listening."

**Albert Tydings, MD '74**  
*Obstetrician & Gynecologist*  
*New Orleans, LA*



"Knowing Dr. Robert Rohner, was an important part of the puzzle I had to solve in my choice of careers. His mastery of the pathology lecture, which year after year earned him

the best teacher award, his humanity, his knowledge of and concern for students, were legend. After trying to walk in his footsteps for 27 years, I can only marvel at his talent and success."

**Robert Hanrahan, MD '72**  
*Associate Professor of Pathology*  
*and Laboratory Medicine*  
*East Carolina University*  
*Brody School of Medicine*



"Some 20 years after graduation I returned to Upstate to give a talk to the department. I cannot tell you how proud I was to 'lecture' my teachers, now colleagues, particularly Bob Rohner,

who sat smiling smugly in the first row. Mentoring is everything and I have tried to emulate his teaching and relationship to students throughout my now-40-year professional career. Thank you, Bob. It all began with you."

**Gustave L. Davis, MD '63**  
*Clinical Professor of Pathology;*  
*Professor in Applied Mathematics*  
*Yale University*