

2002 ASHG AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION Introductory Speech for Kurt Hirschhorn*

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Webster's dictionary is rich in definitions of the word "education." Among them are two: First, the act of providing knowledge, skills, and competence, and, second, the act of rearing or bringing up. These two educational goals Dr. Hirschhorn fulfilled abundantly and with remarkable skill, organization, and energy.

Dr. Hirschhorn's interest in genetics was engendered at N.Y.U. where he graduated in 1954, trained in internal medicine, and then began work on hyperlipidemia, which induced him to study genetics at Uppsala in Sweden and, on two occasions, with Harry Harris in London.

His initial faculty appointment was at N.Y.U., where he started a genetics clinic and a course for medical students, both the acts of a bold and determined man, taken at a time when genetics in the general medical opinion had much to do with fruit flies and nothing to do with people. It was the day of the general practitioner of medical genetics, now lost in a cloud of molecules. The breadth of the generalist, embracing population genetics, cytogenetics, biochemistry, and Mendelism, provided the intellectual basis for the creation of a field of medical genetics, and Dr. Hirschhorn, with his organizing ability and his energy and determination, was the right man at the right time. It should be remarked that he remains a generalist still.

In 1966, Dr. Hirschhorn went to Mt. Sinai, where he started a genetics clinic and a course for medical students, much patterned on his efforts at N.Y.U. Later, from 1977 to 1995, he was Chairman of Pediatrics at Mt. Sinai. Dr. Hirschhorn has had many awards, including our own Allen Award. I note that several of these are from N.Y.U. and Mt. Sinai. I am particularly impressed with these, since I know that there is an even chance that you can fool an outsider, none at all that you can fool a colleague.

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What are Dr. Hirschhorn's specific educational accomplishments? First, the clinics at N.Y.U. and Mt. Sinai have been mentioned. To the latter in a 10-year period came 60 fellows who have spread the word throughout the world. Second, Dr. Hirschhorn was and is a popular visiting teacher with a long list of institutions where he has shared his insights. Third are numerous research papers embracing many subjects; several are listed as citation classics. Fourth, yeoman service to the American Society of Human Genetics, including its presidency and membership on the boards of The American Journals of both Human and Medical Genetics. And, fifth, editorship, with Harry Harris, of the well-known *Advances in Human Genetics*, from 1970–1995.

Next, what of his activities in the rearing and bringing up aspects of education? First, Dr. Mellissa Richter and Dr. Hirschhorn started the now well-known and -regarded Genetics Counseling Course at Sarah Lawrence. Second, with Daniel Callahan and a few others, Kurt Hirschhorn acted as midwife to the Hastings Institute. And, third, he was one of the active founders of both the American Board and the American College of Human Genetics.

In summary, Dr. Hirschhorn's career has included the roles of investigator, teacher, and organizer of elements into entities, particularly medical genetics, and he is an important factor in bringing it to its current vibrant state. An entity like medical genetics is not created from design but by necessity. It takes its identity from the coalescence of its various parts. Among, embracing, and emanating from those parts and their whole is education, without which the enterprise would collapse. Dr. Hirschhorn's part in the creation and welding of these parts to form a whole has been a vital one.

The next phase in medical education is to make the principles of genetic transmission and variation and their penetrating and widespread consequences central to all medical thinking and practice, and genomics promises to do that. I'll bet that Kurt Hirschhorn, though, by now, no spring chicken, will continue to be engaged. It's more than a pleasure to me to present this award to Dr. Hirschhorn, it's an honor.