On Presentation of the Proctor Award in Ophthalmology to Abraham Spector

Introduction of the Proctor Medal for 1983

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It is my pleasure and honor to present this year’s Proctor Medalist Dr. Abraham Spector who is Professor of Ophthalmic Biochemistry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. During the 25 years he has been in eye research Dr. Spector has amassed an impressive record in the cataract research field. He and his group of outstanding young investigators have made the most penetrating studies in unravelling the nature of the process of protein aggregation which is probably the basis for one major form of senile cataracts. In the process of developing his thesis for cataract formation he has gone beyond the protein field into the metabolic and environmental factors. Dr. Spector’s provocative work has brought us to the very brink of understanding the nature of a senile cataract. I won’t say much more of his brilliant studies because in all likelihood the exciting findings will be revealed to you during his Proctor Lecture.

Let us examine his background to see what we can learn about the making of a Proctor Award winner. First of all he received excellent training. He was a graduate student in the Department of Biochemistry at NYU chaired by Dr. Severo Ochoa who received a Nobel Prize when Abe was a graduate student. Abe received his PhD in protein biochemistry under Dr. Milton Levy. During those days the first choice of any postgraduate protein chemist was to further his training at the famous Carlsburg Laboratory headed by Dr. Linderstrom Lang. Abe Spector was one of the few to receive the coveted fellowship to this distinguished Laboratory. After completing his 2-year fellowship there, he joined the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology under Dr. David G. Cogan. I might provide a little more detail of the unusual circumstance of a basic scientist leaving his parent department to forge a career in a clinically allied field. I first met Abe Spector when I was a teaching assistant at Bard College when it was part of Columbia University. When Abe was considering his future after the Carlsburg Fellowship, I contacted him about the tremendous potential in the virgin lens protein field and the possibility of his joining the Howe Laboratory to pursue this work. I sent him all the literature about the subject and he wrote back and said that it looks very interesting but he wanted to know what he can do after he completed his work on the lens protein which he thought should only take 3 years. He is now in his 26th year which indicates that he is either a very slow worker or there was more gold to mine than he first thought. I think Abe will be first to tell you that his entry into the eye field through the Howe Laboratory was the best possible thing that could have happened to him. The Howe Laboratory opened a new world to him. A world in which there was mixing of ophthalmologists and basic scientists at the lunch table and even in the clinics where biochemists not too infrequently were found examining patients. The reason for this unusual sight was that whenever Dave Cogan found a patient with a problem that related to his biochemists’ interest he would call them in to see the patient and discuss his problem. This is how Dave Cogan broadened the horizons of the basic scientists unselfishly giving of his precious time to help train and encourage them to use their skills to study clinical problems. The Howe Laboratory was an ideal training place for ophthalmic scientists. They learned the value of attacking a problem with a full court press rather than an one dimensional approach. The Howe Laboratory approach was successful as evidenced by the number of studies that were at the leading edge of many research areas. It comes as no surprise that Dave Cogan has produced more ARVO award winners than any other individual. Nine awards for the Proctor and Friedenwald have been given to those who spent their formative research years at the Howe Laboratory while David Cogan was its director. You might say, therefore, that it was programmed in Abe Spector’s karma that he would be destined to win the Proctor Award. After 7 years at the Howe Laboratory his talents were widely recognized and Abe was given a position of leadership at Columbia University.
University by the late Dr. George Smelser who was then head of eye research. Dr. Spector continued to flourish at Columbia and has now established the world's leading laboratory in cataract research. As you might expect his fellow cataract researchers at Columbia treat him with great respect and deference. But, you know how these young people are—they think anyone over 39 is growing old. From their parochial perspective they really look upon Abe as an aging lens but luckily he is like the lens which as you know continues to grow throughout life. They are very protective by keeping him out of the Florida sunshine as much as possible so he won't photo-oxidize and become too heavily pigmented. They think he is in good shape as long as he is able to retain his clarity. Dr. Spector has attracted scientists to his laboratory from not only this country but from Asia, Europe, Central and South America as well. He is a dynamic leader with an infectious enthusiasm for his work which inspires his associates. Because of his extraordinary contributions to the field as a creative scientist and outstanding leader he is well deserving of the coveted senior award of the Association—The Proctor Medal.