

In memoriam

Thomas Dermott Trainer, MD 1928-2023

October 2023—Thomas Dermott Trainer, MD, a member of the CAP Board of Governors from 1994 to 2000 and secretary-treasurer from 1999 to 2000, died on June 10 at age 94.

Dr. Trainer chaired the CAP Commission on Anatomic Pathology, Commission on Clinical Pathology, Council on Scientific Affairs, and Finance and Ligand Assay Resource committees. He served on numerous other committees, among them the Chemistry Resource, Standards, Surveys, Industry, CLIA Implementation, and International Accreditation committees.

Dr. Trainer officially retired from the University of Vermont Medical Center in 1994 but worked at UVM until 2018. He was director of laboratories and served as interim chair of the UVM Larner College of Medicine Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine. He joined the UVM faculty in 1960 and in 1973 was named full professor of pathology and attending pathologist, a position he held until he was named emeritus professor of pathology in 2004. In recognition of Dr. Trainer's contributions to the department, the clinical laboratories at the UVM Medical Center are named for him and his wife, Joan.

"He never left," says Scott R. Anderson, MD, director of cytopathology at UVM Medical Center and residency program director for 14 years. "He may have retired from clinical work, but he still did consults. He looked at challenging cases." Even after he began to reduce his sign-out time, "he was at every department consensus conference to provide his insight and input." Dr. Trainer was at all the grand rounds and all resident conferences, Dr. Anderson says, describing him as "a constant presence."

"He was a true study of pathology throughout his entire life," he adds.

Bobbi S. Pritt, MD, MSc, CAP governor and chair of the Division of Clinical Microbiology at Mayo Clinic, attended medical school at UVM Larner School of Medicine and completed residency there from 2001 to 2006. She recalls Dr. Trainer at all education conferences and clinical meetings. "He was always the voice of reason who would speak up in a blunt but respectful way and ask, 'Why are we doing this?'" When a meeting became esoteric, she says, Dr. Trainer "would always bring it down to earth" in what she describes as a "classic Dr. Trainer kind of to-the-point" way.

Says Dr. Anderson, "He was one of those pathologists who had this impressive ability to pull back facts and content," historically and from current literature. Long after Dr. Trainer's years of signing out cases had ended, "he was on top of the literature. He must have spent all his time reading when he wasn't golfing, which was another big passion."

When Dr. Trainer was shown a difficult case, says Sharon Mount, MD, UVM director of autopsy service, "he might pull a case report and slides he remembered from 30 years ago or quote a journal article with molecular analysis from the most recent journal. He had the most remarkable memory, and his thirst for knowledge was inspiring."

Dr. Mount recalls his empathy and mentoring of junior faculty, "his kindness often hidden under his gruff, no-nonsense approach." He was there for her and others to talk about the stresses of family life, she says, and how to compromise when faced with professional issues. "He once explained that work life was like a marriage," she says. "Do you want to make it work or do you want a divorce?"

Bruce MacPherson, MD, who retired in 2005 after 40 years in pathology at UVM, says Dr. Trainer was "one of the last examples of the highly skilled generalist pathologist. Tom was a superb surgical pathologist—knowledgeable, efficient, and eager to share his knowledge. A true role model for countless residents and fellows. And a skilled administrator, overseeing the explosive growth of the chemistry laboratory in the latter half of the 20th century."

Dr. MacPherson calls Dr. Trainer a “card-carrying member of a distinguished group: The greatest generation of Vermont pathologists was the group of physicians who staffed our department in the 1960s and early ‘70s.”

He wasn’t alone in his view of Dr. Trainer, he says. “Countless students, residents, and fellows shared my admiration.”

Dr. Pritt recalls Dr. Trainer stepping up after his official retirement to mentor junior pathologists during a time when there was a shortage of senior pathologists at UVM. “For all of those young faculty, he was a lifeline,” she says.

“He definitely touched many, many lives,” Dr. Anderson says, and left behind “quite the legacy.”

Though colleagues mourn his death, Dr. MacPherson says, he and others are thankful for having had the opportunity to benefit from his wisdom and experience.

“Dr. Trainer was and always will be a role model in both my professional and private life,” says Dr. Mount.

Dr. Pritt shared what Dr. Trainer’s UVM colleagues have said: “He died on his own terms.”

“He led a very happy and fulfilling life right up until the end. He played a full game of golf, went to sleep, and drifted off,” she says.

Dr. Trainer was named CAP Pathologist of the Year in 1995, and he received the CAP Laboratory Improvement Program Service Award in 1997.

He is survived by his brother, four daughters, four grandchildren, four great-grandchildren, and his companion Marilyn Trepanier. His wife, Joan Francis Freme, predeceased him in 2006.

—Amy Carpenter Aquino