

Robert Harlan Moser, MD, MACP: A Remembrance (1923-2013)



As a new kid on the block, the “rite of passage...was to remain alone in a tiny, dark cul-de-sac in the middle of a railroad tunnel while a steam locomotive thundered by.... It was all quite horrible; the incredible roar, the stench and sear of white-hot anthracite flinging hissing cinders, and the proximity of tons of hurtling steel.”¹

Bob never avoided a challenge. There were many, most recounted in *Past Imperfect: A Personal History of an Adventurous Lifetime in and Around Medicine*.¹ Bob referred to it as “The Book.”

Robert Harlan Moser received his Doctor of Medicine degree from Georgetown in 1948. Residency was interrupted by Korea, where he saw heavy combat as a regimental surgeon. Concern for the troops was always a leitmotif for his career. At an Army hospital in Salzburg, Austria, he encountered patients who suffered because of their treatments: chlorpromazine for jaundice, quinidine for thrombocytopenia, and reserpine for Parkinsonism. He collected these cases, reviewed the literature, and presented them at an Army-wide conference in Frankfurt, Germany. In attendance, Dr F. Denette Adams, a Harvard professor, encouraged Bob to publish the information. The article² and subsequent book³ set Bob on the course for the rest of his life. He rapidly rose through Army academic medicine, which he took to a whole new level. Tours of duty at Brooke, Beaumont, and Tripler army hospitals were capped by his appointment as Chief of Medicine at Walter Reed in Washington, DC, which he considered to be his best job. As a University of Virginia senior doing electives there in 1968, I was struck with how exciting a hospital it was. I can still visualize morning report with Bob sitting at the round table. Arrayed about the room were his subspecialists, house officers, and students. Such gravitas. You did not want to let him down.

Bob’s subsequent career was just as distinguished: private practice in Hawaii, editor of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, the Executive Vice President of the American College of Physicians for 10 years, and consultant to private industry. Throughout, he was

constantly writing—columns for *House Physician Reporter*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, and the American College of Physicians newspaper, *Pharos*. In all, he wrote 4 books, not counting new editions of *Diseases of Medical Progress*. I was always struck with his erudition and catholic interests. One column I remember: While most readers were titillated by Samuel Shem’s *The House of God*, Bob’s writing for the American College of Physicians *Observer* was apoplectic.⁴ He could not countenance such irreverence. It made me feel a little guilty for enjoying it.

The Book has so much more: crewing on a tramp steamer to Puerto Rico as a teenager, where the crew in port made sure he was initiated in *l’amour*; hitchhiking alone across the United States; surviving a bear attack; and his love for Linda. Oh, and he was also a flight surgeon for the Mercury and Gemini programs. Ed White, who died later in Apollo 1, was his best astronaut friend. He kept him from being grounded during the Gemini program. How? It’s in The Book.

Bob occasionally would edit pieces I wrote. He took no prisoners. He was a friend, but even more he was a mentor. I wish I could send this essay to him for his blue pencil treatment. He would demur, but his life is well worth remembering.

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References

1. Moser RH. *Past Imperfect: A Personal History of an Adventurous Lifetime in and Around Medicine*. New York, NY: Writers Club Press; 2002:2.
2. Moser RH. Diseases of medical progress. *N Engl J Med*. 1956;255:606.
3. Moser RH. *Diseases of Medical Progress: A Survey of Diseases Unintentionally Induced as a Result of Properly Indicated, Widely Accepted Therapeutic Procedures*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas; 1959.
4. Shem S. *The House of God*. New York, NY: Dell; 1978.

Suggested Reading

1. Moser RH. *House Officer Training: A Casual Perspective*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas; 1970.
2. Moser RH. *A Decade of Decision: A Physician Remembers the American College of Physicians, 1977-1986*. Philadelphia, PA: American College of Physicians; 1991.

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