

A Tribute – In Memoriam
By Philip Getson, DO



Somewhere around 1986 or '87, I had made the decision that I was going to focus my medical career on the evaluation and treatment of patients with what we then called Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy. In order to educate myself, as there were few available courses at the time, I flew to a meeting dedicated to that subject at a hotel somewhere in Florida. The keynote speaker at the conference was Dr. Robert Schwartzman. What made this interesting was that he was based at Hahnemann Hospital in Philadelphia and I was practicing some 20 minutes away in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

He was the last speaker before lunch, and while most of the attendees went to a meal provided by the conference, I went to the hotel's restaurant. As fate would have it, Dr. Schwartzman was right behind me in line. I asked if he would join me for lunch. This was my first meeting with him.

Over the ensuing hour we talked about so many things pertaining to the disease that I knew not only that I wanted to continue to learn more and treat patients, but that a bond had been formed between us that would continue for over 35 years.

From that time moving forward, Dr. Schwartzman became my mentor and my friend. Despite being the Chairman of the Department of Neurology at Drexel University College of Medicine/Hahnemann Hospital, running a clinical teaching practice at the hospital and being incredibly busy, he never once failed to return a phone call within hours to provide information, advice, and direction. This type of collaboration was very important to him, as was assuring that each and every patient had personal attention and that their physician not only received a written report but, when necessary, verbal communication to assist that physician in treating their patients afflicted with this disorder. As the state of medicine progressed to electronic medical records, Dr. Schwartzman stood his ground and refused to make the change. He felt that EMRs were "crap" and did not convey the necessary information to the recipient of the correspondence. He once told me that he would quit practicing before he would convert to EMRs.

When the Republican National Convention was in Philadelphia and then-President George Bush got ill, it was Dr. Schwartzman who was chosen to accompany him on Air Force One back to California to deal with any in-flight medical emergencies. The neurologic problem that plagued the President was not RSD, but Dr. Schwartzman was so well-respected in his field that he was the first and only choice to make that flight.

The level of respect that Dr. Schwartzman garnered not only from his patients but from his colleagues, his staff, hospital personnel, and in fact anyone who knew him, was unmatched in my 45 years of practice. Having seen over 4,000 patients with RSD/CRPS, he made a point to assure that each and every one of those patients felt like they were the only patient that was under his care. He made everyone feel special.

Just after the turn of the 21st Century, he was presented with the opportunity to afford patients intravenous Ketamine to treat the CRPS. I was fortunate and flattered that he chose me to assist him in this endeavor and together we put together protocols for the use of the drug on an inpatient and outpatient basis. Through his efforts, the “Ketamine coma” was initiated first in Germany and later in Mexico. This followed the denial of the United States Government to allow him to do such procedures in this country. Undeterred, he reached out and found a way to make this high-dose infusion a reality. In fact, he personally flew to Germany to meet with the doctors, inspect the hospital, and assure himself that the referrals that he made of his patients to this groundbreaking protocol were within standards that were acceptable to him. He continued to work 12 to 15-hour days not only evaluating and treating patients, but writing articles and ultimately books that provided information to medical practitioners that would educate them and further help them help others.

When he retired, albeit somewhat reluctantly according to him a decade later, he left a legacy never to be forgotten. Despite relocating to Florida, he was always available to me, other physicians, and even some of his former patients to answer questions and provide insight that he had garnered from his over 40 years of experience.

During a recent conversation, he told me that he was writing a 2,000-page book as well as a smaller one of about 200 pages, the former in neurology and the latter regarding CRPS treatment.

He participated in the meeting in Budapest, Hungary to help formulate the “Budapest Criteria” now used as a gold standard for the identification of patients with CRPS. His Curriculum Vitae including articles that he wrote look like a small phonebook and while it provided insight into his professional life, it could not possibly provide insight into his humanity.

There is an old saying about someone being a “gentleman and a scholar.” Whoever coined that phrase had Dr. Robert Schwartzman in mind. He was the ultimate example of both. He was my mentor and my friend.

Dr. Schwartzman passed away peacefully on August 4th. He will be remembered and mourned by many.