

Professional Tribute

Gabriella E. Molnar MD: Grandmother of pediatric rehabilitation medicine

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Dr. Molnar was born in 1926 in Hungary (1). She was always an outstanding student demonstrating lifelong learning and leadership throughout all academic years. She graduated from the Medical School of Budapest in 1950, completing her internship, residency and board examinations subsequent. She became a board certified pediatrician in 1954. In 1956 during the Hungarian Anticommunist Revolution she, her husband, a pathologist, and their 6-year old daughter escaped from Hungary by crossing the Hungarian border into Austria at the Bridge of Andau. This bridge the Russian military destroyed shortly after her crossing. The Bridge of Andau achieved fame with the book *The Bridge of Andau* by James Michener in 1957. After crossing the border, she and her family walked with other refugees 5.6 miles along the “Road to Freedom” entering the village of Andau where great hospitality was received. Dr. Molnar knew very well the turmoil of war and life of a refugee (2). This experience reflects in all of her works and lifetime encounters with exceptional

compassion for patients, families and those of greater need.

On a special immigration quota for Hungarians, Dr. Molnar and her family arrived in the United States within a few weeks. They settled in New York in November of 1956. After completing her internship and residency training, she received her license to practice medicine in the State of New York. She became Board Certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. Her practice began in 1962 as faculty in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at this same institution of her training. Full time tenured professorship by 1977 reflects her hard work ethic and superb academic and clinical skills. One of her first and most noteworthy publications was in 1979 in the *Annals of Pediatrics*. In predicting future ambulatory skills in children with cerebral palsy, she and her research team identified sitting at the age of two seen only in those with future ambulation (3).

In 1982 the decision was made to move to California for additional cardiac care required by her ill husband. She continued with her passion for excellence in the care of children with physical and developmental needs by creating the Department of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine at the Children’s Hospital and Research Center of Oakland, California. She also became a Clinical Professor at the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of California, Davis.

Dr. Molnar achieved National and International Reputation in her special field of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine. She has trained 23 Physicians in this field, including post-residency Fellows from the United States, Canada, Australia, Philippines and Israel. She published 46 scientific articles and 5

Books on the subject of rehabilitating children with physical impairment. Dr. Molnar served on the editorial board of the Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation from 1976 to 1994 and the Journal of Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology from 1992 to 1997. Lecture invitations and presentations include numerous medical schools and academic institutions of the United States, Oxford England, and several cities in Australia and Europe. As an acknowledgement of her clinical, educational and scientific contributions, she received several awards. These included the California Physician of the Year Award from the governors committee. From the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, she received the Distinguished Clinicians Award and the Dr. Frank Krusen Award. The Dr. Krusen Award is the highest acknowledgement given for outstanding contributions in medical education, practice and scientific activities in the Field of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Her guiding principle has always been that children are not miniature adults, but individuals with changing physical, intellectual, and emotional needs and abilities. At every age, therefore, the principles of rehabilitation medicine have to be adapted to these changing aptitudes. Her guiding principle I believe has helped develop the Field of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine from the onset. In my opinion, this principle is core to the Field of PRM both now and into the future. She was always frustrated with the Field of PRM being designated a “subspecialty”. It was her feeling that the Field of PRM is as immense as that of Adult PM&R having all the same conditions if not more, just occurring during the developmental years. In her own words, “one could write the whole textbook of Rehabilitation Medicine on children and give adults just one chapter.”

Awarded a clinical and academic fellowship with her throughout the years of 1988–1990, she became essentially a second mother to my family and myself. We became lifelong friends and professional associates of the best type thereafter. Working with her day to day was one of my greatest privileges for which I continue to be most thankful. Her nickname in the office was “The Boss” of which there was little doubt and for good reason. Her skills, knowledge, abilities to interact, and problem solve were only what most of us could hope to be. You could never say “no” to Dr. Molnar and there was never any doubt as to who was in charge.

Life-long interests and hobbies that Dr. Molnar enjoyed included classical music, opera, visual arts,

reading, puzzles, travel and decorative embroidery. She had a very loving and caring side expressed to those around her including patients and families. This caring extended well into her love for flowers and animals of all kind. She lived in the Oakland California Hills and fed outdoor cats sometimes up to 10 or 20 on any one day. The cats would come from all over for milk and snacks left outside on any individual night. We would work hard on papers and presentations together and then take long walks where she loved to eat chocolates and look at flowers. We went on a family vacation once to Yellowstone National Park; being from Manhattan, she had never seen the western outdoors. On this vacation, she kept trying to feed all the buffalo and wild bear that would wander across the road from time to time. She kept saying, “they’re just hungry and wanting food.” I kept saying to her “they’re not like your cats” and “when we run out of food they are going to be looking at us”. She finally realized what I was trying to communicate and then reluctantly the animal treats went back into her purse.

We published one of our first papers together in 1995 on the medical and functional status of adults with cerebral palsy (4). I remember being so happy coming into her office when it first came out, as it was the first paper we had published together and for myself as a Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine physician. As I entered her office, she looked at me as if something terrible had gone wrong and said “how could you do this to me”. Identified she had, a single reference where I had misspelled an author’s name, something I should have double checked more carefully before sending off the article proofs to publication. I remember these words to this day and it makes me more careful with all I do especially in the world of peer review literature. I suspect this was what she was trying to teach me at the time.

Dr. Molnar retired in 1996 and moved to Tulsa to be near her daughter and two grandchildren. She passed peacefully on 20th of October 2011. I was visiting with her on the phone the day prior.

The Gabriella E. Molnar Research and Education Fund developed through the Foundation of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (FPMR) the following year. The fund provides annual grants, awards and support for outstanding contributions to the Field of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine. Nine research grants have been given out up to the present time. The FPMR in 2019 did not provide a grant, as the research committee identified the applications received for that year as not of high enough caliber.

The Gabriella E. Molnar Research and Education Fund also provides for the Dr. Molnar Lifetime Achievement Award gifted potentially every year. The award, when given, is to a physiatrist felt worthy through a lifetime of service with contributions to the Field of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine as determined by the FPM&R. Nine Gabriella E. Molnar Lifetime Achievement Awards have been given out up to the present time. Donations to the fund through communication with the FPMR are encouraged, welcomed and greatly appreciated.

Conflict of interest

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Tulsa World Newspaper, Obituary, 10-21-11.
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