A Tribute to Dr. Albert Cuetter

Khalid I. Afzal, M.D.

It was 7:55 am and I could see a never-ending sea of red taillights moving with an arduous sluggishness. The down town exit of I-10 was truly rendering an entangled portrayal of its alias ‘Spaghetti Bowl’. ‘They must have heard about the accident at Geronimo’, I thought out loud, ‘Everything is going to be okay’.

Inspite of Dr. Albert Cuetter’s reputation as an excellent teacher, I was dubious about my first impression presumptively being late on the very first day of the Neurology rotation. It was already 8:12 am when I arrived at the door of the Neuroconference room in the basement of the El Paso Psychiatric Center. It was partially opened and I could see someone sitting cross legged with a small piece of colored chalk in his right hand tapping on the table with a melodious rhythm. I gently knocked at the door with the nail of my right index finger. ‘Come in’, a casual voice emerged. With my background of a foreign medical graduate and belonging to a culture where professors have attained a self acclaimed guise of the ‘High Priests’ if not being ‘Divine’ altogether, seldom visible to the masses and that too with all the paraphernalia of ‘the Holiness’, it was shocking for me to see Professor Albert C. Cuetter, M.D., head of department of Neurology at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center-El Paso sitting alone in the room seemingly immersed in some deep thoughts. Mutual greetings were exchanged and the morning lecture commenced, no questions asked.

The next two months rotation was a life time experience for me. I followed Dr. Cuetter like a hungry duckling, throughout the day, ready to acquire anything and everything from his extensive experience spreading almost 5 decades in the field of neurology. He became an inspiration and role model for me through all the aspects of training. I relearnt the art of practicing medicine like a person who thought he knew driving just by reading books and then someone acquainted him with the accelerator, the meaning of the right of way or rules of changing lanes in the expressway and above all how and where to stop. Accompanying him through different floors of Thomason hospital helped me witness a new experience spreading almost 5 decades in the field of neurology. He had been getting the Outstanding Teacher Award from the medical students consistently for over 20 years. He has numerous publications to his credit that cover a span of almost 40 years. He has the honor to serve in the United States Army Medical Corps for over 20 years and received numerous awards for his exceptional services to the country. Among others he received The Army Commendation Medal, The Meritorious Service Medal and The Legion of Merit during his tenure in the Army. Due to his ongoing affection with the academics, he offered his assistance to the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and initiated a collaborative Neurology rotation for the medical students and the residents at William Beaumont Army Medical Center in 1984. After getting retirement from the Army in 1990, he accepted the full time clinical professorship at Texas Tech and became the founding father of the neurology department. Since his arrival at the campus, he had been getting the Outstanding Teacher Award from the medical students consistently for over 20 years. He has numerous publications to his credit that cover a span of almost 40 years. Due to his ongoing research in the field, he is considered an authority in the neurological manifestations of neurocysticercosis, which is a disease caused by the infestation of the worm taenia solium in the central nervous system. At the neurology department he is appreciated as a father-figure. His moments of distemper are considered to be insubstantial and momentary like the fog on the glass, when present may seem a lot but when clears in-
crease its sparkle!

Despite getting the chance to practice in the private sector, Dr. Cuetter chose to offer his services to the under-served population of the El Paso community at Thomason hospital. He always goes one extra step in the care, welfare and education of his patients and their families. Dr. Cuetter’s inherent humaneness, passion, compassion and indulgence in his practice are exemplary. He is a consistent advocate of change in the existing healthcare system and never hesitates to point the flaws in the managed care based healthcare.

At his stage of professionalism, practice of medicine does not remain just a practice but witnesses its metamorphosis into a behavior. A behavior where one sees through the eyes of medicine, hears through the ears of medicine, touches through the hands of medicine, feels through the heart of medicine and more so breathes through the lungs of medicine. His ongoing contributions have attained him such a legendary stature that he has become an unforgettable part in the history of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and Thomason hospital. I hope that he continues to be a source of inspiration, stimulation, and motivation for the future generations of the medical students and the residents as well.

Khalid I. Afzal, M.D., Department of Neuropsychiatry, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, El Paso, Texas.