

Remembering Tom Meyer

John J. Frey, III, MD, *WMJ* Medical Editor

I met Thomas Meyer, MD, shortly after I moved to Madison in 1993. He came to talk with me about a program he had developed through the office of continuing education at the University of Wisconsin that assessed and prescribed programs for remediation for physicians in trouble.

After participating in the program over 15 years, I came to realize that Tom was a national innovator who influenced many similar programs across the country. He was much too humble and self deprecating to take credit for the idea, but others recognized him and his work. He approached it as he did most interactions with colleagues—with thoughtfulness, generosity, compassion, and humor. He said we all were potential candidates for the program and my interaction with the doctors who I met during those assessments confirmed Tom's point of view. Physicians were sent to the 2-day assessment by their hospitals or insurance as a condition of continued practice, and Tom made what could have been a humiliating experience one of kindness and understanding. If physicians entered angry and defensive, it was because of the way that Tom and his colleagues treated them, they left feeling that they had had an opportunity to redeem themselves and that, whatever the overall recommendations, they were fairly treated. It is how everyone who ever interacted with Tom Meyer felt, in the end. The experience inspired me to reflect on my own struggles, faults, and need for redemption.¹

I came to know Tom at our breakfast meetings at Mickies Dairy Bar and even though he was a trained cardiologist, I never felt that he looked with contempt at my usual



Thomas C. Meyer, MD, 1926-2012

bacon and eggs and potatoes. He would just offer me a statin with my coffee.

His work on the *WMJ* and with the Wisconsin Medical Society was a continuation of his role as gentle teacher and guide for colleagues. His letters to authors were, in keeping with his nature, encouraging and positive while still letting the author know that a revision would require a great deal of work. His suggestions about my own letters were always funny but instructive. "He might respond a bit less angrily if you phrased this another way." And he was always right. He remained a wonderful teacher and colleague even though he struggled with chronic illnesses for a decade, making jokes about his "Swiss cheese brain" while continuing to be positive and exploring the world.

The most remarkable thing about Tom was his thoughtfulness. Because of a terrible tragedy that involved the death of a medi-

cal student and injuries to others and to a faculty member, I had to fly on less than 24 hours notice to Johannesburg, South Africa in the summer of 2000. I had no idea what to expect when I got there and was anxious and sleepless when I arrived. As I came through customs, I saw a tall man with a sign with my name. He introduced himself as Tom Meyer's brother, a GP in town, and said that Tom had called him and asked him to come meet me as I would probably need some help. I have no idea how Tom heard of the tragedy or how he knew I was traveling to South Africa but I will never forget his and his brother's kindness. Tom's first reaction to almost anything, it seems, was what could he do to help—whether a physician struggling with deficiencies, an author struggling with writing, or a colleague under pressure. Tom Meyer was a compassionate and humane physician who lived a full and remarkable life in the service of the profession and touched the lives of generations of doctors. We should all be so fortunate.

Reference

1. Frey JJ 3rd. Forgiveness. *Fam Med*. 2001;33(10):779-80. <http://www.stfm.org/fmhub/fm2001/nov01/John%20779.pdf>. Accessed July 25, 2012.

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Doctor Meyer was medical editor of WMJ from 1995 to 2007. Before he retired, Dr Meyer was a professor of pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin Medical School, where he also served as associate dean. He was director of the medical school's Office of Continuing Medical Education and also served as medical director of St. Mary's Hospital/Medical Center in Madison.

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