

Burt Sobel: A farewell to a friend, mentor, and dedicative leader of SEBM and EBM



This issue of *Experimental Biology and Medicine* is dedicated to my colleague, mentor and friend Dr. Burt Sobel who left us on May 3, 2013. His contributions to the fields of cardiovascular disease and diabetes are legend as was his strong positive influence on collaborators, colleagues, students, and past and future patients. It was impossible to know Burt and not to respect and admire him, so you cannot really separate the categories above from his friends. An immensely beautiful and moving memorial written by the people who knew him best: his family and friends will begin this issue which is dedicated to the memory of Burton E. Sobel, M.D.

While others have eloquently spoken of his career and dedication to family, students and patients in the memorial article, I am going to focus on the last eight years in which Burt and I worked side-by-side to help build the Society of Experimental Biology and Medicine (SEBM) and its journal *Experimental Biology and Medicine* (EBM) with other Presidents of the SEBM and members of the SEBM Council. We both envisioned the success of SEBM and of EBM to be intertwined to the point that they had to be seen as a unity of one. I will tell the story by using Burt's and my own words from e-mails and letters.

The story begins on November 5, 2005 when I flew to Chicago to be interviewed at the Hilton Chicago O'Hare Airport as one of two finalists for the role of Editor-in-Chief of EBM. Burt became a member of the SEBM in 1970. He had served as an SEBM Councilor from 1998 to 2002, was the first and current President of the Board of Governors for the SEBM Endowment Fund, and was now the President-Elect, a role that he held from 2005-2007. The interview room was filled with the President from 2005-2007, Dr. Charles Blake, Burt as the President-Elect and the members of the SEBM Council. Burt asked me an initial question: What would I change in the journal as Editor-in-Chief? I was to learn that this was typical of Burt Sobel. He always got right to the point at hand. My answer was

equally direct, "I would change everything from cover-to-cover." Burt did not look panicked by my answer, although a few others did, and asked for details. I told him that I would change the front and back covers making them more eye-catching and symbolic of the future focus of the journal. I then went on to explain this future focus, as I envisioned it, as adding many interdisciplinary categories which I felt were the most exciting fields in modern biomedical science. With this increase in categories I would need to add many leaders in these fields as Associate Editors and members of the Editorial Board. I would globalize the journal adding international offices, editors, associate editors and members of the editorial board with the goal of increasing the presence of EBM worldwide with SEBM following this lead. With these very bold pronouncements, and the other finalist being a standing and respected Associate Editor of EBM, I left Chicago quite sure that the job would go to the other candidate. After all I had previously not been associated with SEBM or EBM. You can imagine my surprise, upon landing at the DFW airport, when I turned on my cell phone and listened to a voicemail from Dr. Charles Blake indicating that I was selected by the SEBM Council as the next Editor-in-Chief of EBM.

I knew that to make this EBM vision a reality I needed Burt's complete support as he was the President-Elect for SEBM. I quickly found that Burt's views on what needed to be done for the society and journal were resonant with my own and that he would become a staunch supporter and a tremendous ally in making things happen. His first letter to me dated November 9, 2005 said, "Dear Steve, It was wonderful to learn that you will be assuming responsibilities as Editor-in-Chief of *Experimental Biology and Medicine*. Your interactions with us at the recent Fall Council meeting were truly inspiring. It is most reassuring for me as President-Elect to know that the journal will be led by such a vigorous and talented editor and that we will be tilling new ground and strengthening not only the journal but also the society by virtue of your expertise. I look forward to working closely with you." With these kind and supportive words a friendship, mutual respect and collaboration were born.

I wrote back on November 24, 2005. An excerpt of that letter follows: "Dear Burt, It was my great pleasure to meet you and the other members of the SEBM Council. I am truly honored to have been chosen to be the next Editor-in-Chief of *Experimental Biology and Medicine*. Although my term does not officially start until July 1, 2006, we are already working on the transformation of EBM. In consultation with Dr. Martin Adamo (then the Chair of the SEBM Publication Committee), I have established a timetable which will have all the new Scientific Focus Areas

approved, new Associate Editors and Editorial Board members approved, and a new cover design in place before the EB meeting in early April 06. I look forward to working with you in restructuring EBM into an elite journal; that is considered the place to publish cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research." Burt and I and EBM were off and running. The vision and goals were clear, and we were ready to take on any and all challenges.

We published the first issue of EBM, in which I was Editor-in-Chief, in July 2006. It was based on a meeting which I organized for the Association of Anatomy, Cell Biology and Neurobiology Chairpersons (AACBNC) on the subject of "The future of interdisciplinary research and teaching: breaking down the barriers". This meeting held in Aruba in January 2006 had three invited Nobel Laureates, who had earned their awards based on very interdisciplinary work: Professor Aaron Ciechanover, Professor Russell Hulse and Professor Allan MacDiarmid. All accepted my invitation to attend and present at the meeting. Allan unfortunately had an accidental fall, late in December 2005, shortly before the meeting and was hospitalized and therefore could not attend. But all three provided manuscripts for the July 2006 EBM issue. Furthermore all three joined Professor Gunter Blobel as EBM's first Nobel Honorary Editorial Board Members. Burt wrote to me on July 25, 2006 saying "Congratulations on the truly spectacular debut of *Experimental Biology and Medicine* under your editorship. From the elegant front cover through the depiction of Nobel Laureates on the back cover and everything in between, the journal is a testament to excellence. Production is, of course, an obvious component of the dignity it conveys, but of even more long term import, the content and substance speak eloquently.... On behalf of every member of our society and every reader of our journal, I want to express profound appreciation to you for the work that went into creating the new directions exemplified by the first issue and to wish you every success as you steer the journal toward even greater glory." I learned several lessons about Burt from this letter. His memory was amazing! He remembered his question to me and my answer "I would change everything about the journal from cover to cover" from my interview. I learned for the first time that Burt read every EBM issue from cover-to-cover. (For the entire time that I knew Burt he would write e-mails frequently, saying laudatory things about an EBM issue or a specific article). It became obvious to me that his ability to write elegantly was far greater than my own. Most importantly, I learned that Burt was a remarkable gentleman who took great pleasure in praising others. His words were very important to me as I had just taken on an important responsibility which we both knew would impact the future of not only the journal but also the society.

Burt Sobel was President of the SEBM from 2007 to 2009. He had a deep and abiding affection for our society based upon its rich history, focus on the convergence of experimental research and human health, and its major interest in mentoring and supporting the career development of young researchers. For these reasons he was very proud to be the President of SEBM. He took over the reins

during a challenging time in the financial history of the US and world economy. The global financial crisis began in 2008 right in the middle of Burt's term as President. Burt was the right man to be in office at this time because he had tremendous financial acumen. Just as all of our personal investments were hurt during this period of time so was that of the SEBM. There were some amongst the SEBM Council who supported across the board cost cutting as the approach of choice during this period. I did not share this view and fortunately for the journal and society neither did Burt. What Burt favored was a thoughtful cutting of non-essential items (this of course was in the eye of the beholder), careful reconsideration of the SEBM investment strategy and a well designed and specific growth plan. I felt that that growth plan needed to include globalization of the journal and that this would help in gaining international personal and library subscriptions for the journal and increasing SEBM membership worldwide. I think that all of the SEBM Council members agreed with this vision, but some questioned the timing. At the 2008 Experimental Biology (EB) Meeting in San Diego, after a particularly spirited debate at the SEBM Council Meeting on the topic of cost cutting and growth, I had a very important lunch meeting with Burt. We always had the ability to have frank and on point discussions on very difficult subjects. At lunch we agreed on the growth strategy including globalization of EBM as being in the best long-term interest of SEBM, that the limited cost cutting should not include the journal and that the SEBM financial focus should be on reinvesting a portion of the SEBM assets. At that lunch I told Burt that for EBM to realize the vision which I had articulated that "I would need him to have my back." Burt told me that he would and I trusted him implicitly. From that moment forward we moved together in lockstep towards our common goals for EBM and SEBM. During this period of 2008-2009 we opened our EBM/SEBM Asian office at the National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) in Tainan Taiwan with our first Asian Editor (Professor Huan-Yao Lei) and our first European EBM/SEBM Office at King's College London with Professor Farzin Farzaneh appointed as our first European Editor. We also signed a lucrative, and mutually beneficial, contract with the Royal Society of Medicine Press (RSMP) to be our new publisher. The agreement with RSMP, which was recently purchased by SAGE, has led to stability of the SEBM financial picture. I would like to clearly state that none of this would have been possible without the absolute support of Burt Sobel and members of the SEBM Council.

During 2009 to 2011 Burt served as Past President of SEBM, and EBM was seeing tremendous growth in the number of manuscripts (largely due to the globalization strategy) and increases in our impact factor. Burt took great pride in both.

In March of 2009, I was asked by John M. Hughes the Provost and Senior Vice President of the University of Vermont to write a letter commenting "on the quality, significance and impact of Professor Sobel's scholarly work." Burt was being considered as one of the first two University Distinguished Professors at the University of Vermont. In my letter dated March 29, 2009 I summarized Burt's

remarkable career in which he combined basic, translational and clinical cardiovascular research that would better quantify the extent of and improve the treatment of patients with acute myocardial infarction. Burt Sobel's research had saved lives and improved the quality of life for patients with cardiovascular disease worldwide. After praising Burt's contributions to biomedical research and medicine, I closed by saying, "Burt is one of the rare individuals who can combine the talents of a basic researcher with the ability to translate his work to clinical trials that are leading to better treatments for Cardiovascular Disease. I have gotten to know him personally in his leadership role as President of the Society of Experimental Biology and Medicine and I have the upmost respect for Burt as a decisive leader and wonderful gentleman. I am sure that he brings these same qualities to his roles at the University of Vermont, including Directing the Cardiovascular Research Institute. In summary, I give my strongest endorsement to Dr. Burt Sobel as a future University Distinguished Professor at the University of Vermont. I cannot imagine a stronger candidate." I was delighted to learn from Dr. Hughes in May 2009 that Burt had been selected as a University Distinguished Professor.

On February 25, 2010 Burt learned that he was in the first class of recipients of the new SEBM Distinguished Scientist Awardees. This award is based upon the recipient's contributions to biomedical research and to SEBM. There was no one more deserving of being in this first class than Burt. Upon learning of this award Burt wrote the following e-mail to the SEBM Council. "A marvelous and very much appreciated honor... I thank the committee and Council for it and shall cherish it along with my very fond memories of all activities with SEBM, past and present."

As part of my duties at SUNY Upstate Medical University I established a Postdoctoral Affairs office. To shine a light on the wonderful research being performed by postdoctoral fellows and clinical research fellows, we decided to create a "Beyond the Doctorate Day." On this date we would have an annual platform session, poster session and keynote speaker. The challenge was to find a keynote speaker whose work would be of great interest to both the basic science and clinical researchers, at all levels, at Upstate. It did not take me long to decide who that individual should be: Dr. Burt Sobel. Burt's amazing research career included work on Cardiovascular Disease and Diabetes, which was one of our Research Pillars at Upstate, and included work which beautifully flowed from basic research to translational research to clinical trials. I invited Burt to be our first Keynote Speaker in what has become an annual event. Burt visited us on March 3, 2011. He asked probing questions to the platform speakers that preceded his Keynote Lecture and then got up and gave a talk on "Plasminogen Activator Inhibitor Type-1 (PAI-1) and Diabetes: From the Bench to the Patient." The audience was enthralled with this wonderful presentation. Burt had carefully considered his audience and put together and delivered a perfect keynote lecture. This was the first time that I had seen Burt give a research seminar, and I was impressed with the incredible quality of his work and his

ability to explain it so that every person in the audience would understand the major points.

On December 1, 2011, I wrote to Burt about his becoming a member of the EBM Editorial Board. Despite his incredibly busy schedule 6 minutes later I received an e-mail from Burt indicating that he would "look forward to being able to serve the journal." He also sent his impressive CV (it was so large that it came in five Word documents). My e-mail to Dr. Robert Mallet (then Chair of the Publication Committee) said simply, "It is my honor to recommend Burt Sobel to become a member of the EBM Editorial Board in the Physiology category. As you know Burt is an international leader in the cardiovascular research field and one of the strongest supporters of EBM and SEBM." Burt was approved in record time and became an important member of the EBM Editorial Board.

Over the period of 2012 until May 3rd 2013 Burt and I contributed to several SEBM leadership committees that were appointed by SEBM President Dr. Michael Friedlander. These included a review of SEBM and suggestions for future directions and the hire of a new SEBM Director. Meanwhile, with another task force, I was also working on the idea for a new SEBM/EBM China Outreach office to allow SEBM to follow the globalization path forged by EBM (This office was opened in the Shanghai Cancer Institute, Shanghai JiaoTong University on July 1, 2013). Burt was unable to attend the EB meeting in April 2013 where we have our SEBM Council Meeting and the EBM Editorial Board meeting which I chaired. On April 22nd Burt wrote to me to ask whether I could send him my PowerPoint presentation from the EBM Editorial Board meeting. In this e-mail he wrote "It is a privilege to serve on the Board and always a privilege to interact with you in that capacity as well as the many others that have typified our relationship over the past decade." I sent Burt the PowerPoint and then on April 23rd I received an e-mail from Burt that said, "Great report. The submission rate, acceptance rate, and country of origin data were all most impressive. The impact of your China initiative is clearly magnificent. We are fortunate to have such a dedicative, innovative, talented editor for our flagship." On reading this e-mail I was again struck by the kindness, thoughtfulness and sincerity that had been the hallmark of all of my communications from Burt over the years. For about 30 seconds I wondered whether dedicative was a typo and he had intended dedicated. Then I remembered that Burt's writing skills, and vocabulary, far exceeded my own. In my final e-mail from Burt, in which I was the lone recipient, Burt had given me another English lesson where I learned that dedicative is the adjective form of dedication. My last e-mail to Burt was "**You are very kind Burt.**" **Thank you, Steve.** I am so glad that I sent that e-mail. That one line best summarizes my eight years being guided and nurtured by Burt Sobel.

I was part of a group e-mail from Burt on the afternoon of May 2nd dealing with our negotiations with our new SEBM Executive Director Jessica Homa. On the morning of May 3rd I received a phone call from Burt's office telling me that Burt had passed away earlier that morning. I was asked to share this information with the other leaders at SEBM. I was

shocked, heart sick, numb and I could not find any words that would explain the grief which I was feeling. I think that I said something regarding how saddened I was in hearing the news and to share my condolences with Burt's family, friends and colleagues. I got off the phone not knowing how to share this information with Burt's friends in SEBM leadership. I wrote an e-mail to the SEBM leadership group that had been working with Burt on many projects even up to and including the day before. The e-mail was entitled "Heart Broken" and it was sent to Mike Friedlander (then SEBM President), Rex Gaskins (then SEBM President-Elect), Warren Zimmer (then SEBM Treasurer) and Charlie Blake (Former SEBM President and current SEBM Historian). The e-mail sent at 10:47 AM on the same day began with "Dear Friends, I just received a phone call from Burt Sobel's office that has me shaken. Our dear friend, colleague and mentor Burt Sobel has passed away suddenly."

As you now understand Burt Sobel was a friend, a partner in nurturing SEBM and EBM, a mentor, a confidante and a person who always had my back. Burt was bigger

than life as a researcher and leader yet was humble and put others before himself. He was a role model for so many including me. This issue of EBM, dedicated to Burton E. Sobel, M.D., is my small way to say thank you to Burt. I have handpicked the articles within, so that they are in areas that would have been intriguing to Burt. I know that he would have written me a follow-up e-mail full of praise for the work by these researchers.

In addition I have the honor of announcing that the annual award which we give out for the Best Paper of the year in preclinical, translational and clinical research will henceforth be called "**The Burton E. Sobel Award in the Clinical/Preclinical and Translational Category.**"

I would like to thank Dr. Charles Blake, a long term friend of Burt's, for his reading and thoughtful comments on this editorial.

Steven R Goodman, PhD

Editor-in-Chief

Experimental Biology and Medicine