

Learning From a Leader: An Interview With Dirk M. Elston, MD



Roman Bronfenbrener, MD

As residents, we all owe at least some of our knowledge base to the teachings of Dirk M. Elston, MD. I recently sat down with Dr. Elston to find out who the man is behind the work. Our discussion was both a humbling and enlightening experience for me. This interview serves to illustrate the human side of a current pioneer within our field and also to inspire our generation of emerging leaders.

Cutis. 2014;93:E7-E9.

In contemporary dermatology, Dirk M. Elston, MD, needs no introduction. Some residents have studied from his textbooks while others have read his journal articles or online publications, but all of us owe at least some of our knowledge base to his teachings. Dr. Elston represents the field of dermatology as the president of the American Academy of Dermatology; he also serves as the deputy editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* (JAAD) and is the managing director of the Ackerman Academy of Dermatopathology in New York, New York, among other positions. When Dr. Elston visited the Department of Dermatology at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, for Grand Rounds (Figure), I sat down with him to find out who the man is behind all the work.

BRONFENBRENER: Dr. Elston, what is your daily routine like?

ELSTON: There is a lot of variety, but I can give you a snapshot. During the week, I rent an apartment

in New Jersey that lets me walk to the train station, and one 12-minute stop later I arrive in Manhattan. I walk 2 miles every day, and then I walk up to my office, which is on the 10th floor. I'm definitely a walker and train person.

All my work takes place during the weekdays, including all my dermatopathology (dermpath) sign out at the Ackerman Academy. There, we have 7 fellows plus international fellows that I am responsible for teaching. All of my writing, JAAD editorial duties, board of dermatology work, etc, takes place during the week as well.

I'm an "early to bed, early to rise" person. I wake up everyday at 4:30 AM because that's my most productive time. My productivity is 20 times more in an hour in the morning than an hour in the evening. Even on



Grand Rounds at the Department of Dermatology, State University of New York, Stony Brook (left to right): Nika Finelt, MD; Antonia Fthenakis, MD; Roman Bronfenbrener, MD; Dirk M. Elston, MD; Lisa Anthony, MD; Dan Lozeau, MD; Yoojin Jina Lee, MD.

From the Department of Dermatology, State University of New York, Stony Brook.

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Correspondence: Roman Bronfenbrener, MD, 181 N Belle Mead Rd, Suite 5, East Setauket, NY 11733
(roman.bronfenbrener@stonybrookmedicine.edu).

weekends, I'm the first one up and can get through an entire JAAD queue before anyone else is up. But once my family is awake, I'm theirs for the day.

BRONFENBRENER: What are you proudest of in your career?

ELSTON: I'll talk about it in broad strokes. What I'm proudest of in my life are my 2 kids, Nate and Carly. I'm second proudest of all my other kids: my residents, my fellows, my books, the journal. Those are all my other kids!

BRONFENBRENER: Are there any subjects in dermatology you find particularly fascinating?

ELSTON: My passions have always been dermpath and complex medical cases. I like the encounters where you need to sit back and think because the first-, second-, and third-line treatments have failed. I've always been very interested in infectious dermatology, alopecia, and autoimmune diseases, to include immunobullous and connective tissue diseases. Although I don't practice Mohs surgery, I enjoy practicing procedural dermatology, particularly with residents. I like staffing the difficult nail biopsies or eyelid excisions.

BRONFENBRENER: Recently, the myDermPath app became free. Can you tell us how you got involved?

ELSTON: The app was developed through a Sulzberger Institute for Dermatologic Education grant and has now expanded to also include clinical modules and 2500 virtual teaching slides associated with it. That's all free on both iOS and Android! It has an interactive algorithm to help you work through a case, quiz features, a clinical image atlas, treatment algorithms, etc. I got involved when Raj (Rajendra) Singh approached me after a dermpath course I taught. He had an idea but was not sure how it should be executed. It began with myself, Raj, and Tammie Ferringier working on it. Raj is very enthusiastic, and as we have ideas it's nice to hook them into that platform. And you definitely cannot beat free for a product like that.

BRONFENBRENER: How do you best learn? Any tips for residents?

ELSTON: People learn differently. For me, it depends on what I'm learning. Visuals always work best for me. Connecting a memory with a patient experience, a human being, definitely makes things stick. With case-based learning, there's just far better retention, and either a real or simulated patient will stick better with me.

With text, I'm a big highlighter. I'm a multi-color highlighting with notes in the margin kind of

guy. I make a total mess of my textbooks. In fact, nothing is more depressing to me than a pristine copy of *Andrews' Diseases of the Skin: Clinical Dermatology*. When I went to Indiana University, they showed me their worn out copies that were bound together with duct tape because they were so heavily used. That's a great day for me; that was a well-loved textbook.

BRONFENBRENER: What is Dirk Elston's definition of a great day off? Any interesting hobbies?

ELSTON: A great day off would be time with family. It would still start at 4:30 AM for me; maybe I'll be digging in the garden before sunrise. My wife thinks I'm a nut, but I'll get the spring bulbs all dug into the yard before anyone is up with just a flashlight. Then we'll make breakfast. My son's favorite breakfast is crispy crepes with butter and powdered sugar, and I'm the designated crepe maker. We can also visit my mother who lives about 20 minutes away from my home base in Philadelphia. She's had some health troubles recently, so it is good to be so close.

As for hobbies, my wife Kathy and I love to cook, garden, and hike. We cook everything, but where we differ is dessert: she's chocolate and I'm fruit. It works out because when we entertain company they always know they're getting 2 desserts. I make what I like and Kathy makes what she likes. My son and I also like to ski. One of our favorites is Jack Frost Big Boulder in the Pocono Mountains.

BRONFENBRENER: You talk a lot about the changing health care environment. From a resident's standpoint, what big changes can we expect?

ELSTON: Medicine has changed fairly significantly every decade that I've been in it since I've graduated medical school, and the pace of change has only accelerated. It will not be what it has been in the past decade; it's going to be different. But think about what a privilege it is to be able to practice dermatology! We see adults and kids, we see complex medical problems, and we do lots of procedures. We get to do pathology. It is truly a wonderful, wonderful field. If your motivation is true love of the field, everything is going to be fine. The compensation is not going to be what it was, and that's across the board in medicine. Dermatology has in general done better than many specialties in terms of reimbursement, but I think there will be significant leveling of the playing field.

BRONFENBRENER: How have you divided your time between pathology and clinical dermatology?

ELSTON: Looking back over my career, I've been as much as 90% clinical and as much as 90% dermpath. Right now, I'm heavily dermpath because my primary responsibility is running a large laboratory. But even

with every case you read, with every piece of glass you put on your stage, if you're a good dermatopathologist, you see the clinical in your head. You're seeing a patient every time you read a slide or you're not doing your job. It's all dermatology.

BRONFENBRENER: Do you have any favorite songs to listen to while you work? What about on your commutes, what do you listen to?

ELSTON: I like every genre, but I'm actually a person who likes quiet when I'm working, no distractions. There are things you need to learn about yourself. I function best in the morning and that's my peak time, but I have to be by myself and it has to be quiet. Working in the morning in quiet keeps me focused on my task, whereas a loud, distracting evening can make it difficult for me to concentrate.

On commutes I listen to *Dialogues in Dermatology* faithfully; I've done it my entire career. I read every one of my journals cover to cover and I listen to *Dialogues*. But I also really like books on tape. I like novels with characterization. Recently, I loved *The Art of Racing in the Rain* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Both were really good character study books.

Final Thoughts

Speaking with Dr. Elston was both a humbling and enlightening experience. Although he maintains executive leadership positions in representative

organizations within dermatology, he still finds time for personal obligations. Dr. Elston is bound by the same 24-hour day yet has developed routines and techniques that allow him to maintain peak efficiency despite numerous concomitant responsibilities. Residents who aspire to follow in his footsteps should aim to understand their own strengths to structure their days to enhance productivity. Of equal importance was his reminder to keep a healthy work-life balance. I hope this interview serves to illustrate the human side of a current pioneer within our field and also to inspire our generation of emerging leaders.

SUGGESTED READINGS

American Academy of Dermatology. *Dialogues in Dermatology*. <http://www.aad.org/education/aad-professional-education/dialogues-in-dermatology>.

Chabon M. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2008.

James WD, Berger TG, Elston DM. *Andrews' Diseases of the Skin: Clinical Dermatology*. 11th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Elsevier; 2011.

myDermPath. <http://www.mydermpath.com>.

Stein G. *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2009.