

# Dermatopathologist Bernie Ackerman Dies at 72

BY BETSY BATES  
Los Angeles Bureau

Dr. Albert Bernard “Bernie” Ackerman, 72, who trained more than 400 dermatopathologists during a career devoted to intellectual precision and ethical rigor, died of heart failure at his New York City home Dec. 5.

Colleagues from around the world remembered him as brilliant, innovative, opinionated, relentless, and wickedly funny, and effusive in his criticism and his praise.

“Beyond the legend was a kind and generous man whose loss has hurt us all deeply. You encouraged us to think

freely, allowing us to believe that we might dare contribute original thought to the field, rather than just follow,” wrote Dr. Sheetal Desai, a dermatopathology fellow at the Ackerman Academy of Dermatopathology, in an online legacy page linked to the New York Times (<http://www.legacy.com/NYTimes/GB/GuestbookView.aspx?Person-Id=121145714>).

A tribute to Dr. Ackerman written on the occasion of his 70th birthday called him “probably the best known living dermatologist in the world” (*J. Am. Acad. Dermatol.* 2006;55:862-6).

Penned by former student and colleague Dr. Wolfgang Weyers of the Center for Dermatopathology in Freiburg, Germany, the article went on to suggest, “There is probably no competent dermatologist or pathologist in the world, who, when confronted with a section of a biopsy specimen from an inflammatory skin disease, does not follow the method of histopathologic diagnosis advanced by Dr. Ackerman.”

That method, meticulously detailed in his landmark 1978 textbook, “Histologic Diagnosis of Inflammatory Skin Disease: A Method by Pattern Analysis” (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger), essentially imposed an “order and structure and clarity” on the categorization of inflammatory skin diseases, which previously had been idiosyncratic, said Dr. Kenneth Resnik of the Institute for Dermatopathology in Conshohocken, Penn.

“Without question it was really his breakthrough contribution,” said Dr. Clay J. Cockerell, professor of dermatology and pathology at the University of Texas, Dallas. “I still use it every single day and teach it to all my fellows.”

Born Nov. 22, 1936, in Elizabeth, N.J., the son of an orthodontist, Dr. Ackerman received his undergraduate degree cum laude from Princeton University. He completed his medical education at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1962 and residency training at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, the Hospital of the Univer-

sity of Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts General Hospital, where he also completed a fellowship in dermatopathology.

During his distinguished career, he served on the dermatology faculty at the University of Miami (1969-1973) and di-

rected the dermatopathology divisions at New York University School of Medicine (1973-1993) and Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia (1993-1999) before founding the Ackerman Academy of Dermatopathology in New York City in 1999. He retired in 2004, but continued to be active in researching, lecturing, and writing.

In the late 1970s, Dr. Ackerman founded the

International Society of Dermatopathology and the *American Journal of Dermatopathology and Dermatopathology: Practical and Conceptual*, a journal that later evolved into the interactive Web site, [www.Derm101.com](http://www.Derm101.com). He served as president of the American Society of Dermatopathology from 1984 to 1985.

Besides his sentinel textbook on inflammatory skin diseases, Dr. Ackerman authored or coauthored 59 other books and wrote more than 700 scientific articles. His curriculum vitae spanned 93 pages. His publications covered a wide variety of topics, including overviews of neoplasms by histologic subtype and tomes on dysplastic nevi and apoptosis. As in his lectures, his publication titles reflected broader perspectives as well: ethics and the philosophy of dermatologic practice, “pitfalls,” and “quandaries.” Earlier this year, his popular book, “Sun and the Epidemic of Melanoma: Myth on Myth” (New York: Ardor Scribendi), was published in a paperback edition.

A connoisseur of fine writing and a devotee of Sir William Osler, Dr. Ackerman cultivated clarity and nuance in his own published works, at times relying on a Latin phrase or a pun to capture the essence of his message. His family noted that he constructed his manuscripts in cursive writing on legal paper.

His dogmatic style affronted some; Dr. Weyers in his essay recalls that “not all [of his] judgments were on target, and Ackerman’s confidence in the validity of them made it difficult to argue with him.”

Nonetheless, wrote Dr. Weyers, “It is remarkable in how many controversial issues he proved to be right.”

Dr. Ackerman was often at odds with institutions and individuals. He co-founded the Coalition and Center for Ethical Medical Testimony in 2003 in response to what he considered misleading court testimony by physicians.

Honored by the American Academy of Dermatology with its Master Dermatologist award in 2004, he resigned from the board of directors in 2001 in protest about election rules.

At the time of his death, he remained actively critical of the AAD Seal of Recognition program that Dr. Ackerman believed commercialized the specialty and represented a conflict of interest.

At medical meetings, he delivered rapid-fire, painstakingly researched, often witheringly personal lectures that questioned diagnostic classifications or arguments for creation of a new disease category. On the other hand, he responded with delight and intrigue when challenged by a colleague with a novel idea, so long as it was well conceived.

In marathon work days, “dermatology was his life,” recalled Dr. Resnik.

Still, he enjoyed travel, the company of good friends, and exotic cuisine. He relished Indian food so spicy the sweat broke out on his bald head.

“What I think I’ll always remember most was his sense of humor. He had this incredible laugh,” said Dr. Cockerell, who said Dr. Ackerman’s influence on his career was “massive.”

In a 2003 “Luminaire” living mentor tribute to Dr. Ackerman in the *Archives of Dermatology*, he described himself as “Dogmatic and unyielding at scanning magnification, reasonable and accommodating at high power. Imperious and autocratic from afar, humane and empathic close up.”

He was, said Dr. Mark A. Hurt, “a genius,” as conversant on ancient history as on the intricate clues hidden within a

biopsy slide. “He was an utter joy to be around. He made you want to care about skin and everything else in life,” said Dr. Hurt, a dermatopathologist in practice in Maryland Heights, Mo., who reviewed his recent textbook on follicular neoplasms.

Well versed in, and mindful of, his Jewish heritage, he accepted an honorary degree from the University of Giessen (Germany) in 1998 in memory of all of the Jewish boys who would have been his contemporaries in dermatology, but whose dreams ended in the Holocaust.

Always a student of history and art, he recently established a professorship at Harvard University in culture and medicine. To honor his subspecialty, he donated a dermatopathology reading room at Massachusetts General Hospital, complete with his collection of antique microscopes and a 10-headed microscope for collaborative study.

He also loved New York City’s Central Park, where he often sat in contemplation. A bench will be placed there in his memory with the inscription, “He loved this lake.”

Dr. Ackerman’s survivors include his brother, James, of Pittsboro, N.C., his sister Susan Zwick of Summit N.J., nieces Kathryn Kislak and Amy Zwick, and nephews Marc Ackerman and Andrew Zwick. Contributions may be made to [www.TruthfulTestimony.org](http://www.TruthfulTestimony.org), 145 East 32nd St., 10th Floor, New York, NY, 10016. ■

## His Many Contributions Remembered

BY PHILIP LEBOIT, M.D.

Dr. Ackerman changed the face of dermatopathology, and had a profound influence on both dermatology and pathology.

His landmark textbook set a standard for medical publishing, and for the establishment of a logical method for diagnosis.

Suffice it to say, no one since has attempted a textbook of inflammatory skin disease. Its elegant prose, layout, superb photography, use of “leader lines” to point out features in photomicrographs, and bulleted main points were practically unknown prior to this opus.

A year later, in founding of the International Society of Dermatopathology and its official publication (serving as its first editor-in-chief), Dr. Ackerman set a new standard for integrating peer-reviewed papers, editorial commentaries, and works bringing together art, literature, and medicine.

As a physician-investigator, Dr. Ackerman set forth the basic criteria still in current use for recognition of the earliest stages of mycosis fungoides, Kaposi’s sarcoma, and melanoma in situ. He played a key role in the clarification of the histopathologic features of erythema multiforme and Grover’s disease.

He coined the term “granulomatous slack skin” to describe a rare condition first reported by others, and was the first to grasp that it was a lymphoma. He first described rheumatoid neutrophilic dermatitis and interstitial granulomatous dermatitis with arthritis.

He held many strong views: that dysplastic nevi were just another type of nevus; that melanoma was a single disease process, and that it should be called melanoma in situ from the outset no matter what its site; and that dermatofibroma was a fibrosing inflammatory process, not a neoplasm.

He believed that the link between sunlight and melanoma had been “oversold,” and that sentinel lymph node biopsy was valueless in managing patients with melanoma.

There is hardly an area in dermatology or in dermatopathology that one can study without finding an “Ackermanian” hypothesis. I expect that proving or disproving Dr. Ackerman’s writings will keep a generation of investigators busy.

DR. LEBOIT is professor of clinical pathology and dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine and codirector of the UCSF Dermatopathology Service. He trained with Dr. Ackerman.



DR. ALBERT BERNARD ACKERMAN