BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Professor Joseph A. Kassirsky

THE NAME of Joseph A. Kassirsky is widely renowned thanks to this scientist’s long and productive career in teaching and in basic scientific work in various fields of medicine. He is the author of more than 225 works, some translated into foreign languages.

Kassirsky’s career started very early. While a third year medical student, he was already at work in the infectious wards at Fergan* and in his fifth year, left to serve on the Civil War front. He took part in the Orenburg† operations as Senior Medical Officer to a cavalry regiment and later, in the ranks of the First Cavalry Army, served in the campaigns of the Don, Ukraine, and Northern Caucasus as well as in operations against the Machno counter-revolutionaries. In July 1920, Kassirsky was sent to complete his medical education at Saratov and on graduation was directed by H. A. Semashko‡ to work in Tashkent.* Here he was assigned to the private clinic of E. N. Krukov, the founder of Russian hematology. His interests in this field was deepened when, with Doctor Krukov, he made trips abroad to the Rockefeller Institute in New York, the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, and the Institute of Tropical Diseases in Hamburg.

Kassirsky was especially interested in the training of key personnel and throughout his career, not only in Tashkent but later in Moscow, he tackled this problem which at that time, as Lenin had declared, was one of the most important national political tasks facing the new Soviet state. The first professors in Uzbekistan were students of his. The scientific researches he carried out while in central Asia resulted in many publications. Attracting special attention were works on Tropical Diseases (1933; 1935) published in association with L. F. Burova and “Essays on Hygiene in Hot Climates” (1935). This Central Asian period of Kassirsky’s career was especially productive in the study and solution of many problems in tropical pathology. Several important monographs on malaria were written and these side by side with the classic monograph on malaria by E. M. Taryev, brought much that was new to the understanding of the pathogenesis and pathokinesis of malarial disease and to

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*Uzbekistan
†A fortress town in the Urals.
‡First Commissar (Minister) of Health, RFSSR, 1918–1930.

From “The Medical, Teaching and Society Activities of Professor Joseph A. Kassirsky, Member of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences. (On his seventieth birthday)” Problemi Hematologii i Perelivanyia Krovi (Moscow), XIII: 61–63, May 1968.

Editorial Note: It was thought that this biographical note of one of the Soviet Union’s leaders in hematology, Professor Kassirsky, would be of interest to our readers. We are indebted to Dr. John Vaughn, Charlotte Memorial Hospital, Charlotte, N.C. for his fine translation.

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methods of treatment. In 1933, Kassirsky described the disease beriberi for the first time in the Soviet Union and from his extensive clinical experience also published on mite spirochetosis, parrot fever, and other diseases. For the diagnosis of leishmaniasis, Kassirsky developed the sternal puncture technic and devised a safety needle for this purpose, the design of which came to be used universally.

In 1934 began a fruitful period of activity for Kassirsky in Moscow. In 1936, at the Central (Semashko) Clinical Hospital he set up at first some courses, and later a department of post-graduate medical education; from 1936 he was made Professor of a branch of the third department of internal medicine in the Central Institute of Post-Graduate Medical Education. Kassirsky is a talented teacher, his lectures filling the auditorium with lively interest in the solving of problems; they are always clearly reasoned, logically arranged and exciting. Every year in his department, Director Kassirsky conducts a course of post-graduate study for several hundred internists and hematologists from all corners of the country.

Kassirsky’s scientific activity has been marked by an unusually wide diversity. His fundamental researches are reflected in a number of publications devoted to the study and treatment of diseases of the blood system. In his handbook for specialists in the field, he has thrown light on many theoretical and practical problems of the pathology of the hematopoietic system. He formulated, and set down in detail, our knowledge of the formation and morphology of the blood cells. He first adopted the practice of lymph node and internal organ puncture with complete cytologic study of the cellular systems and diagnosis of diseases related to them. In 1942, for the first time in the world, and independently of Tocantins, he proposed the intrasternal transfusion of blood, a procedure of great significance in the treatment of trauma, burns, cachexia, etc. His long researches brought to attention many valuable conclusions in the field of leukemia. His is the first basic classification of leukemia based on his functional cytology approach to diseases of the blood. And for the first time in both native and world literature, again drawing from his extensive clinical material (over 150 cases), he threw much light on myelofibrosis and osteosclerosis. Kassirsky set up a special genetics laboratory for research into chromosomes and enzymes. One achievement of this work has been the genetic concept of the pathogenesis of the leukoses and his co-workers have conducted other substantial serious researches from the extensive clinical material. His researches into the mechanisms of the various remissions in leukemia have attracted remarkable interest. His many years of basic work in hematology were brought together in the fundamental work by Kassirsky “Diseases of Blood Forming Systems” (1948) and also in “Clinical Hematology” with co-author G. A. Aleksef.

Kassirsky’s scientific interests are not only confined to hematology; he is one of the outstanding specialists in the field of chemotherapy. The extensive experience of this clinician and teacher has been condensed in the book “Essays on Modern Clinical Therapy” 1966 written with Doctor Y. I. Milevsky.

This scholar did great consultative work in the period of the Great Patriotic War. Kassirsky traveled to military hospitals in Moscow and district and to
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the Leningrad, Baltic and Voronezh fronts. From 1942-52 he was chief internist for the railway transport workers of the Soviet Union.

In recent years, the scientific, practical and teaching activity of Kassirsky was especially productive. In 1958 he was elected a corresponding member and in 1963, a full member of the Academy of Medical Sciences. In his clinics are more than 600 scientific workers, these having presented more than 70 candidate and 28 doctorate dissertations. Under the editorship of Kassirsky there have appeared, recently, several interesting basic handbook publications (Handbook of Internal Medicine; Handbook of Functional Diagnosis) and, new in the Soviet Union, “Genetics in Hematology” written with I. A. Vorobyev and others. Kassirsky’s career is a clear example of the combination of the finest tradition of the old school of therapeutics and the new school of complicated research technics. He is one of the most lucid and talented popular writers. He wrote an interesting popular-science book asserting the importance of Russian scientists in the major discoveries in medicine—“I. P. Pavlov and His Significance in Medicine” 1941; “Blood Transfusions”; “Scientist and Problems.” Great success has been enjoyed by his books “Ronald Ross and the Problem of Malaria,” “Jan Dominic Lappi and First Aid in War” and others. He is widely known by the lay public as the author of popular-science articles in the Journal “Health”, and he has been an active member of the editorial board of this journal since the day it was founded.

Kassirsky is an active committee man. He is permanent member of the board of the All-Union Association of Internists, of Internists of the RFSSR and of the Moscow Society of Internists; he is a member of the All-Union Rheumatology Committee, deputy chairman of the All-Union Society of Hematologists and Transfusionists, member of the Board of the International Society of Hematology and distinguished corresponding member of the Swiss Society of Hematology. He is an active worker and member of the editorial board of some national medical journals (Problems of Hematology and Blood Transfusion) and several foreign journals.

In his devotion to his work, Kassirsky has more than once shown great personal courage. Eighteen months after a serious operation he flew to Cuba on a mission for C. B. Kurashov and in 1966, 40 days after another operation, to the Congress in Australia where he upheld the interests of Soviet Science.

The basic principles and characteristics of Joseph A. Kassirsky as a human being, as a doctor, and as a scientist are—to his fellow man, humanity and solicitude, and to the young scientist—democracy and sympathy. By vocation he is a doctor, indeed a doctor in the very best sense of the word. All his working life he has served as a clear example of boundless devotion, and long, unselfish, self-effacing service to science and to suffering humanity. His career has been marked by a number of government awards—the Order of Lenin on two occasions, the Badge of Honor, and many medals.

The editorial board of “Problems in Hematology and Blood Transfusion”, workers in the field of blood, and comrades warmly congratulate him on his glorious jubilee and wish him health and continued creative success.
Biographical Notes: Professor Joseph A. Kassirsky

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