

William H. Blahd, MD 1921–2011

William H. Blahd, MD, a pioneering nuclear medicine physician and author of one of the first widely used textbooks in the field, as well as an honored figure in nuclear medicine education and research, died on March 6 from complications of polycythemia. He was born in Cleveland, OH, the son of Moses Emmett Blahd, MD, a prominent surgeon who studied in Vienna, Austria. After attending Western Reserve University (Cleveland) and the University of Arizona (Tucson), Blahd received his medical degree from Tulane University (New Orleans, LA) in 1945. He completed his internship at King's County Hospital (Brooklyn, NY) in 1946. From 1946 to 1948, he served as a captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. He completed residencies in internal medicine and pathology from 1948 to 1951 at the Wadsworth Veterans Hospital (now the West Los Angeles [CA] Veterans Administration [VA] Center).

At the Wadsworth, where he would remain and serve as a leader in nuclear medicine for more than half a century, Blahd became acquainted with Benedict Cassen. In 1950 Cassen assembled the first automated scanning system (made up of a motor-driven scintillation detector coupled to a relay printer). The scanner and its later iterations leading to the rectilinear scanner were used with ^{131}I for thyroid imaging. Cassen's work was championed by Blahd, who was among a small group of physicians who conducted initial studies with the scanner. The scanner and its subsequent adoption served as defining events in the evolution of clinical nuclear medicine, and Blahd's endorsement and reports on its initial use offered guidance for physicians who began to integrate its use into their practices throughout the world.

In 1958, with Franz K. Bauer, MD, and Cassen, Blahd published *The Practice of Nuclear Medicine* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas), the first definitive textbook in the field. This was followed in 1965 by *Nuclear Medicine*, for which Blahd served as both an editor and contributor. The list of contributors for these popular texts, which became standards in the field, featured some of the greatest names in nuclear imaging and therapy and allied fields. Countless nuclear medicine, internal medicine, radiology,



and radiation oncology physicians and health physicists used the books to prepare for certification examinations.

Appointed chief of the Nuclear Medicine Department (at first called the Radioisotope Service) at Wadsworth Hospital in 1952, Blahd served in that position for 41 y while simultaneously serving as director of the nuclear medicine residency and technology training programs. In 1966, he was appointed as a professor in medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine, as vice-chair of the Commission on Human Use of Radioisotopes, and as a consultant for the Laboratory of

Nuclear Medicine & Radiation Biology.

In 1972, Blahd received his board certification in nuclear medicine by studying his own textbook for what was then the first nuclear medicine board examination for the American Board of Nuclear Medicine (ABNM). He would go on to serve in numerous positions on the board, including chair (1982–1983) and executive director (1991–2004). He was a Life Member of the ABNM.

After serving on numerous committees and as president of the Southern California SNM Chapter, Blahd was elected president of SNM in 1977. Among many other initiatives he promoted in this period, he undertook, with the assistance of his wife, Mitzi, to reinvigorate the society's Education and Research Foundation (ERF), with a goal of supporting the development of nuclear medicine and nuclear medicine technology through grants and fellowships. Dennis Patton, MD, a former student of Blahd and noted nuclear medicine historian, described Mrs. Blahd as a "nuclear medicine activist." For many years, the couple provided the most active voices for advancing the mission of the ERF. In 1979, to mark the silver anniversary of SNM, Mrs. Blahd funded and put together *Scintillating Cookery*, a popular cookbook that quickly sold out more than 2,000 copies, with proceeds benefiting the ERF. She followed this with another idea that proved as popular: nuclear medicine-themed t-shirts that announced "I'm so scintillating." With these and many more efforts,

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including staffing a booth for the ERF at SNM Annual Meetings, the Blahds helped raise the profile of the foundation and its education and research goals.

A major breakthrough occurred in 1990, when the Blahds won the support of Cassen's widow, Mary Wylie Cassen, who named the ERF as the recipient of her husband's estate. The Benedict Cassen Fund was then used to create the Cassen Award, given every 2 y and referred to as the "Nobel Prize" of nuclear medicine, as well as other pilot research grants and postdoctoral fellowships. Many other gifts would come to the ERF, including the estate of Hal O. Anger, developer of the Anger camera, again through the Blahds' efforts. Throughout his work to secure long-term durability to sustain the ERF, Blahd insisted that the ERF remain independent, a factor that has contributed to its current success and viability. In 2004, the Blahds were recognized with the establishment of the ERF Mitzi and William Blahd Pilot Research Grant. A report in the 2004 *SNM Contributor News* said: "When asked about their efforts over the years, both Dr. and Mrs. Blahd shrug off their accomplishments and instead focus attention on the need to still carry the message about support for nuclear medicine. It is the Foundation's hope that their attention doesn't waver, for there are few equals in the nuclear medicine philanthropic community."

Dr. Blahd, among many other positions at SNM, served as chair of the Publications Committee. He was the author of more than 250 peer-reviewed articles and abstract contributions at professional meetings. His many

areas of service to the field and subsequent recognitions and honors are too numerous to list in a limited space. He was a fellow of both the American College of Nuclear Physicians and the American College of Physicians. From 1991 to 1997 he chaired the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education's Resident Review Committee for Nuclear Medicine, influencing the direction and content of training in the field. His belief in the future of nuclear medicine motivated him to work to establish new departments in Los Angeles-area hospitals, among them Cedars-Sinai, St. Joseph, and Valley Presbyterian.

Blahd is survived by his wife of 40 y, who remains a beloved figure in the nuclear medicine community, 3 children, 5 grandchildren, a stepdaughter, and a step-granddaughter.

In his foreword to Blahd's 1965 *Nuclear Medicine* text, Glenn Seaborg, PhD, then chair of the Atomic Energy Commission and a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry (1951), wrote of the task facing those attempting to chart a path in the new field of medical radioisotopes: "It is a staggering challenge to discern order in the material of life." For well more than half a century, Blahd rose to this challenge by championing inventive minds, training new generations of nuclear medicine specialists, serving as a founding member of institutions that today define the field, and working tirelessly to advance the causes of education and research so that these efforts would be sustained well into the future. His quest for "order in the material of life" provides an example of service that few can emulate but to which many can aspire.

From the Education and Research Foundation of the SNM

Dr. William Blahd was joined by his wife, Mitzi Blahd, in 1977 in revitalizing the *Education and Research Foundation for SNM*, which raises contributions to fund research projects, scholarships, training, and grants in nuclear medicine and molecular imaging for physicians, researchers, and technologists. His contributions will live on in many forms, but perhaps in no manner more effectively than through the lives of the hundreds of physicians, technologists, research scientists, administrators, and others that he trained with unceasing dedication and with unique class and style. Donations in Dr. Blahd's memory may be sent to:

The Education and Research Foundation
In Memory of Dr. William Blahd
16616 Harney Street
Omaha, NE 68118