

Founders of Pediatric Pathology: Dr. Ron Jaffe (1943–2022) – An Appreciation

Pediatric and Developmental Pathology
2024, Vol. 27(5) 383–386
© 2024, Society for Pediatric Pathology
All rights reserved
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/10935266231222712
journals.sagepub.com/home/pdp



Laura S. Finn^{1,2}, Jennifer Picarsic^{3,4}, and A. S. Knisely⁵

Keywords

Ron Jaffe, histiocytosis, liver, Langerhans cell, transplantation, mentor

Dr. Ron Jaffe was a force—feared by some, admired by most, respected by all. His exceptionalism and high standards intimidated many, but he was recognized for compassion, understatement, decency, and humility. He demanded much from trainees, colleagues, and clinicians, whom he taught by example, sparking curiosity, honing the skills of observation, and coaching how to ask the *right* question, pushing them, along with himself, toward excellence.

Born in Orange Grove, Johannesburg, South Africa, the oldest of 3 boys, Dr. Jaffe quickly earned his reputation as a mischievous brainiac. At 12, he met Sandra, who would eventually become his wife, and with whom he crossed continents, endured wars, and reared 2 children. Dr. Jaffe earned his M.B.,B.Ch. in 1969 at the University of Witwatersrand; medical school classmates report that he was “destined to be a superb clinician, teacher, and scientist, despite being quiet and self-effacing.” He then completed a medical and surgical internship at the Johannesburg General Hospital and the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer, Israel, where he stayed to finish his residency in Pathology. His Pediatric Pathology training began at the Children’s Hospital of Boston, under the instruction of Dr. Lynne Reid, followed by a year as a Hematopathology fellow at the Mallory Institute of Pathology in Boston. Dr. Jaffe arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1977 as an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine (UPSOM), working at the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh (CHP), then led by **Dr. George Fetterman***, the first president of the Pediatric Pathology Club (the forerunner of the Society for Pediatric Pathology), and later by **Dr. Eduardo Yunis***. There, Dr. Jaffe went on to become a tenured Professor of Pathology and Pediatrics at UPSOM and the Pathologist-in-Chief, Medical Director of Laboratories, and Marjory Harmer Professor of Pediatric Pathology at CHP. His storied career includes nearly 250 peer-reviewed publications, invited papers and chapters, and multitudes of national and international invited lectures and seminars. Dr. Jaffe retired as Emeritus Professor in 2020.

The curriculum vitae, however, is not the man. Dr. Jaffe was passionate about pathology, but his gift was interest—interest in so very much and so wide-ranging. An accomplished tinkerer,



Figure 1. Medical school graduation with wife, Sandra (1969).

an enthusiast of classical music and opera, Dr. Jaffe was also an insatiable reader, who consumed literature of all varieties, books, newspapers, and essays, as well as the most current scientific publications. Long before on-line journals and PubMed, his daily ascent up the hill from the Children’s Hospital toward home included a pass through the UPSOM library where the

¹The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, USA

²Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Perelman School of Medicine, The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

³Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Division of Pathology, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC), Cincinnati, OH, USA

⁴Department of Pathology, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Cincinnati, OH, USA

⁵Diagnostik-und Forschungsinstitut für Pathologie, Medizinische Universität Graz, Österreich, Austria

Corresponding Author:

Laura S. Finn, The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, 3401 Civic Center Boulevard, 5NW13, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.

Email: finnl@chop.edu

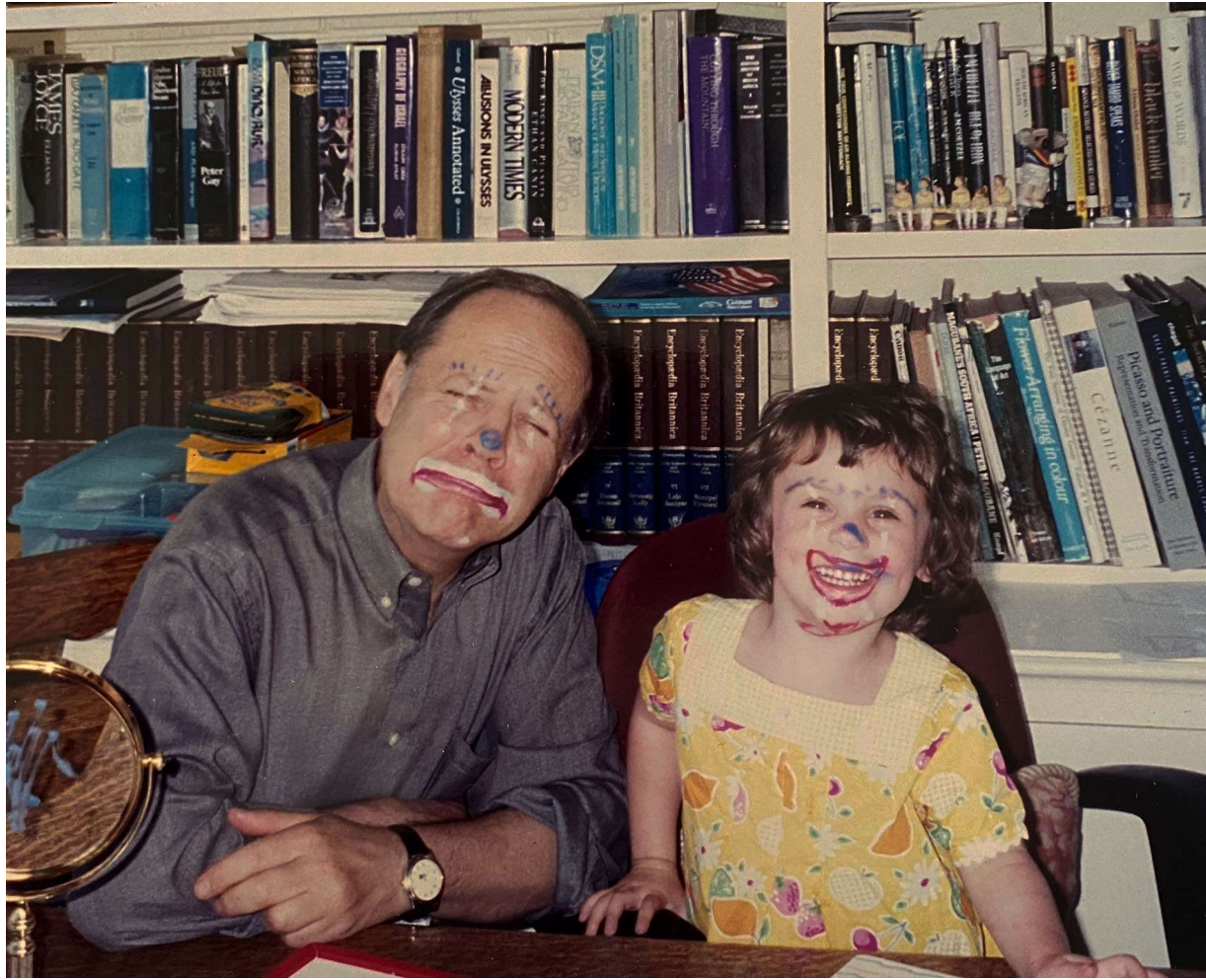


Figure 2. Clowning around with granddaughter, Noa (circa 2004)

newest medical information was absorbed, or at least photocopied, using a billing card on which “stolen from Ron Jaffe, MD” was cheekily written in indelible ink. His wry sense of humor was legendary, amusing, and occasionally shocking to those who recognized a double entendre or dared to engage in repartée.

Pittsburgh suited Dr. Jaffe and his wife, his partner, and friend, who became a clinical psychologist. Two doctors in the family can pose challenges—when a caller requested to speak with “Dr. Jaffe,” their son, who undoubtedly inherited his father’s drollness, inquired “for the head or for the dead?” Although his life was peppered with heartache, the role of “Bumpie” he met with delight. Grandfatherhood was unexpectedly welcomed by the resolute and occasionally grumpy (tellingly, rhymes with Bumpie!) pathologist who cherished the 2 youngsters that tumbled in, enlivening, and enriching his senior years for over 2 decades.

Throughout his illustrious career, Dr. Jaffe was acknowledged as an outstanding pediatric pathologist, proficient in many topics, with scholarly efforts ranging from the normal

and disordered pancreas through lymphoproliferative diseases to Hirschsprung disease, including major contributions to the pathology of pediatric liver disease. His foremost expertise was recognized in the fields of histiocytic disorders and solid-organ transplantation.

To the question “How’s life?” Dr. Jaffe often replied, “It depends on the liver.” Such was the climate in the heyday of orthotopic liver transplantation in Pittsburgh before the Final Rule and MELD score refined graft distribution in the United States under the management of the United Network of Organ Sharing.¹ Collaborating with his adult-pathology colleagues, Dr. Jaffe advanced the field of transplantation pathology, publishing scores of manuscripts defining the nuances of rejection; of transplant complications including infection, post-transplant lymphoproliferative disorders, and recurrent disease; and of investigations into the mechanisms and consequences of immune regulation and dysregulation. It may only have been coincidental that transplant surgeon Dr. Tom Starzl lived 3 doors away. Director of the Liver and Transplant Pathology Division at the University of Pittsburgh



Figure 3. Reconnecting with former trainee, Gabriela Gheorghe, at a gathering hosted by the Jaffes during the SPP Fall Meeting (2019).

Medical Center (UPMC)/UPSOM and internationally recognized expert, Dr. Jake Demetris, recounts—“During my Pediatric Pathology rotation I naturally gravitated toward Ron as my primary pathology mentor, a decision largely based on his considerable intelligence, astute insights in biology, kindness, generosity, principle-guided life, directness, and keen sense of humor. Ron was critical to our co-publications on human allograft rejection, graciously allowing me ‘to drive’ while contributing cases and crucial guidance. However, it is our shared interest in dendritic and antigen-presenting cells that persists with me until today. Well into my career I continued to reach out to Ron for his opinion and advice on important topics. I am forever grateful for meeting Ron, the generous sharing of his time, and the essential impact that he made on my career and life.”

That interest in dendritic cells arose soon after Dr. Jaffe arrived in Boston, his focused study spurred by the circulation of consult slides among **Dr. Blaise Favara***, Ron, and Ron’s mentor, **Dr. Gordon Vawter**. “I was one link in a chain,” Dr. Jaffe said to the Histiocyte Society, of which he was a founding member, while accepting the 2022 Golden Pin in Stockholm—their highest honor—awarded for his lifetime contributions to the advancement of the study of histiocytoses. Dr. Jaffe was one of the first to detail the sensitivity and specificity of various tissue markers (S-100, CD1a, peanut agglutinin, and later,

Langerin) in Langerhan cell histiocytosis (LCH), allowing distinction of the disease (e.g., LCH or hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis) from the macrophage infiltrate of treatment response, and eliminating the need for ultrastructural examination. Defining these disorders by antigenic markers became the new standard, although he knew well that immunopathologic findings did not predict behavior. Since the relationships among various macrophage/histiocyte populations in LCH were unknown, Dr. Jaffe spent a sabbatical at the University of Oxford in the laboratory of Dr. Siamon Gordon in collaboration with Dr. Jonathan Austyn, driving monocytoid populations from umbilical-cord blood to macrophage or dendritic cell phenotypes, hoping to resolve the evanescence of surface markers and the plasticity of lesional cells. He embraced molecular interrogation as it superseded phenotyping and unraveled many mysteries, such as the clonal relationship between acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) and post-ALL LCH but cautioned that “tissue pathology remains relevant because of the massive amount of biological information it encompasses, but only if we are able to decode it.” And decode it he did. He educated pathologists, clinicians, and basic scientists on the nuances of histiocyte biology and pathology and was recognized as a leader in the diagnoses of childhood histiocytosis, receiving materials in consultation from around the world and around the corner. “He was my go-to consultant for difficult histiocytic/dendritic proliferations, no matter the patient’s age,” states Dr. Steve Swerdlow, retired Division of Hematopathology Director at UPMC/UPSOM and lead editor of the 2008 and 2017 editions of the World Health Organization Classification of Tumours of Haematopoietic and Lymphoid Tissues. “His retirement was a major loss to our clinical practice and a loss to patients in Pittsburgh and beyond.” Dr. Jaffe was literally, the consultant’s consultant.

Dr. Jaffe’s dedication to the Society for Pediatric Pathology (SPP) was long and deep, his contributions recognized with 3 Distinguished Colleague Awards. A Society member for over 4 decades, he served on the Council (renamed Board of Directors), was the SPP’s 2001 President, and chaired its Publications Committee for 8 years, helping to initiate a Newsletter, and, most crucially, establishing *Pediatric Pathology* as the official Journal of the Paediatric Pathology Society (PPS) and SPP, which entrusted Dr. Jaffe with the position of first Editor-in-Chief. “He brought uncompromising integrity and a level of scientific rigor that was sorely needed,” noted former classmate, fellow South African and successor as Editor-in Chief, **Dr. Denis Benjamin***. “He could sniff out plagiarism and duplicity and required attention to detail from all associated with the publication of the journal, including double-checking the accuracy and veracity of every cited reference. He oversaw changes in publishers and in the journal name and established efficient systems, procedures, and relationships, all for the benefit of the SPP.”

Exercising his propensity to mentor and to teach, Dr. Jaffe lectured formally before audiences of medical students and

residents, but he seemed most satisfied when training budding or junior pediatric pathologists. He savored his role as “Resident Tutor” for the International Paediatric Pathology Association—Advanced Course in Paediatric Pathology, a request he fulfilled over 10 seasons, initially at the invitation of PPS member and course director **Dr. Jean Keeling**, followed by **Dr. Jem Berry**, then **Dr. Gordan Vujanic**, all of whom, along with course participants, greatly appreciated his tutelage and friendship. But it was his former fellows and simpatico colleagues whose lives he profoundly influenced; many recognize that their career would not be what it is without Dr. Jaffe.

The near-unanimous response from colleagues, friends, and those whom he mentored, when asked to share their memories of Dr. Jaffe, was “diagnostic genius, modest, uncompromising integrity, and wicked sense of humor.” His wisdom was dispensed randomly, without ceremony or pretense, a passing comment here, a reasoned concept there. “Don’t rush things,” he would instructively say, “there are many dance steps to learn before you reach the King and Queen,” guiding remarks offered while reiterating that “an H&E is the best special stain.” Of course, practicality ruled—“turnaround times don’t matter if you’re wrong” and equally shrewd, “this child needs a doctor.”

What if those pearls were often repeated? They were still pearls. Several of those who learned from him recounted his observations on St. Sebastian, martyred by the shots of multiple archers, whose arrow-riddled body is a subject of many Renaissance paintings.² “Be cautious about what you think you see,” Ron was quick to point out, “St. Sebastian did not secrete arrows.” Alter the perspective, but not the observation, and everything is different—the metaphor offered a cautionary allegory, a vehicle for discussion of the untrustworthiness of a snapshot view of an evolving event.

Many remember Dr. Jaffe escaping to his office to “commune with the slides,” the only way to provide an accurate opinion to an inquiry from a colleague. “Autolysis is the refuge of scoundrels,” he offered as a gentle rebuke to a former fellow who thus learned the lesson to scrutinize after having glossed over the microscopic examination in severely macerated autopsy material. Pay attention, dive into your cases, exploit the histomorphologic findings; all were habits he practiced and taught. Dr. Jaffe was an exceedingly generous teacher, gladly devoting hours to double-head microscopy of cases with trainees, sharing nuanced observations and inspiring passion, while effortlessly demonstrating the finest way to practice pathology to anyone who wanted to learn and who was savvy enough to capitalize on his mastery.

While chance timing may preclude Dr. Jaffe from being considered a “Founder” in Pediatric Pathology and numbered among those who have been lauded in these pages, he was certainly one of the discipline’s Luminaries. **Dr. Henry Krous*** precisely and concisely observed “Ron Jaffe was an admired colleague, generous mentor, and dear friend. His contributions to pediatric pathology, the Society, and *Pediatric and Developmental Pathology* are monumental and long-lasting. He will be remembered as a giant in our field.”

Epilogue: There was a brief and welcomed interlude in the rain as cars lined a winding path in the Pittsburgh cemetery and mourners congregated for Dr. Jaffe’s burial. “You will stop seven times *en route* to the gravesite,” the rabbi instructed the pallbearers who carried the simple wooden coffin embellished with a star of David. “This signifies our unwillingness to let go of the deceased.” Indeed, no one was ready to say goodbye so soon.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the shared remembrances from Noa Reiter (granddaughter), and friends and trainees including Denis Benjamin, Michael Caplan, Kudakwashe Chikwava, A. Jake Demetris, Blaise Favara, Csaba Galambos, Gabriela Gheorghe, Jeff Hubbard, Henry Krous, Mark Luquette, Maria Parizhskaya, Steven H. Swerdlow, Will Robichaux, and Gordon Vujanic.

Bolded names in text denote members of the SPP, including Past-Presidents (*).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

1. Code of Federal Regulations. Title 42 – Public Health. Health Resources Development. Organ Procurement and Transplantation. 2003. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-42/chapter-I/subchapter-K>. Accessed June 18, 2023.
2. Wikipedia Contributors. Saint Sebastian. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Saint_Sebastian&oldid=1186126371. Accessed June 18, 2023.