Robert M. Berne, MD, former chairman of the Department of Physiology at the University of Virginia Medical Center, died on Thursday, October 4, 2001, at his home in Charlottesville, Va. Dr Berne’s service to cardiovascular research was exemplary. He was on the editorial board of Circulation Research for most of his professional life, and he was Editor in Chief from 1970 to 1975. Dr Berne was a man of many accomplishments: a devoted and steadfast husband, a loving father and grandfather, a leader of the University of Virginia, and a scientist of world class. He touched family, friends, scientific colleagues, and many others through whose life he passed, especially those whose growth he nurtured. Dr Berne was born in Yonkers, NY, grew up and was schooled in Brooklyn, and attended the University of North Carolina. He entered Harvard Medical School with the class of 1943. In late 1944, he became a medical officer with the US Army, and at the end of the war, he returned to a residency in Internal Medicine at Mount Sinai and preparation for a career in cardiology and the study of the cardiovascular system. A fellowship with Dr Carl Wiggers launched Dr Berne on a lifetime of research and teaching and a collaboration with a lifelong friend, Matthew Levy. He became Chair of the Physiology Department at the University of Virginia in 1966 and served in that capacity until 1988. With quiet strength and gentle leadership, he built one of the premier physiology departments in the world.

His early research with Matthew Levy led him ultimately to publish a study, somewhat speculative at the time, that proposed a role for adenosine in the control of coronary blood flow, a hypothesis that set a direction for the next 4 decades of his research. In the 1980s and 1990s, his work on adenosine took on new life with the recognition that, in addition to its role in regulation of cardiac blood flow, the molecule plays a key role in the control of a multitude of biological processes. Bob’s research and teaching yielded more than 200 scientific articles and three textbooks authored with Matthew Levy. In the process of building his department and research programs, he trained dozens of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, who later populated the academic community with senior professors and chairs of departments. In addition, his unflagging support of the other faculty in the department helped many of them to rise to prominence as well. Under Bob’s leadership, the licensing income on his patent for Adenocard, a therapeutic agent for cardiac arrhythmias, was largely returned to the University of Virginia, and used to establish and endow the Cardiovascular Research Center and the Robert M. Berne chair in Cardiovascular Research. True leadership, above all, was a skill of Dr Berne’s that many might emulate.

The significant influence of Dr Berne’s work has been recognized in many ways by his colleagues. He was elected President of the American Physiological Society in 1972, elected to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences in 1979, received the Gold Heart Award of the American Heart Association in 1985, and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1988. In 1994, he assumed professor emeritus status and focused his professional energies on his books and also reenergized his long-standing interests in fishing, tennis, guitar playing, and travel. Meanwhile, he retained an office in the Cardiovascular Research Center, for which he played so critical a role in founding, and continued to mentor everyone from secretaries to senior faculty in his usual way.

Ultimately, he met his illness with the same grace and dignity that characterized all of his other activities, and he accepted the uncertain future, as he had accepted his opportunities. He has been a friend and role model, and a driving force, and all of us will sorely miss him.
In Memoriam: Robert M. Berne, MD
Brian Duling

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