Remembering the Explorers: Robert M. Kacmarek, PhD, RRT, FCCM

Robert (‘Bob’) M. Kacmarek, PhD, RRT, FCCM, Director of Respiratory Care at Massachusetts General Hospital and Professor of Anesthesiology at Harvard, died April 1, 2021, at the age of 72. Bob was a prolific author, investigator and teacher. His nearly 50-year career includes over 330 publications as well as serving as editor on a number of textbooks. Bob was well known for his expertise in mechanical ventilation and his leadership in respiratory care. Bob began his career in Chicago as an oxygen orderly in 1965 and was fortunate to find Barry Shapiro, MD, FCCM, as an early mentor. He was dogged in his pursuit of optimal ventilation for ARDS and was a champion of multidisciplinary care, pushing for respiratory therapy involvement at the bedside as a consultant. The department he built at Massachusetts General Hospital personified his passion.

Bob’s career included a plethora of articles on setting PEEP as well as the use of adjuncts to mechanical ventilation including tracheal gas insufflation, nitric oxide, and partial liquid ventilation. Another major focus of Bob’s research revolved around bench evaluation of technology including complex microprocessor ventilators as well as endotracheal tube fixation devices. He elevated the science of evaluating technology, including development of bench models and simulations where there were none. He often included engineering co-investigators in an effort to faithfully reproduce the clinical environment. Bob collaborated with authors from around the world, sharing authorship with Amato, Blanch, Slutsky, Villar and many others (including each of us).

Above all, Bob loved teaching mechanical ventilation and reveled in hands-on workshops. He routinely traveled the globe lecturing at high-profile societies as well as smaller local events. Bob loved to travel to other nations and share his research and the current state-of-the-art in ventilatory support. His passion for mechanical ventilation and respiratory therapy was fierce. Bob championed the minimum of a bachelor’s degree for entry into the profession decades before it became a reality.

Along with his global reach, Bob attracted a number of fellows to Boston to study in his laboratory from countries around the world, including Japan, China, Thailand, Brazil, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Egypt, to cite a few. In the laboratory and in science, his logic and arguments were linear, his teaching understandable to everyone, and he was resolute to define study protocols and research objectives. He loved to assess scientific dogmas of world-class leaders of respiratory physiology with well-designed studies. He never assumed to be right. If research experiments had indicated the opposite of what he hypothesized, he would just apply the novel knowledge based on the most recent findings. His transparent commitment to scientific testing and sincere determination to implement what proved to be true are probably the greatest teachings to everyone he mentored.
Bob had a strong personality and he warmed to any debate, enjoying pro-con talks in part just for the competition. But he was extremely generous with his time. He frequently assisted young researchers and was always willing to help with a project. He developed into one of the senior statesmen of critical care medicine.

Bob’s passing will be felt around the world in the critical care and respiratory care community. Bob was a unique individual and had few peers. One thing is sure: no one else in history will rise from oxygen orderly in 1965 to Professor at Harvard. His loss is palpable to those of us who were his colleagues and friends.

Figure 1. Robert M. Kacmarek, PhD, RRT, FCCM.

1 Professor, Department of Surgery Division of Trauma & Critical Care, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH
2 Department of Anesthesia, Critical Care and Pain Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA
3 Managing Editor, Respiratory Care, and affiliated with the Massachusetts General Hospital and Northeastern University, Irving, TX