Obituary: Dr Mark E Josephson MD

A personal memory by Hein J. J. Wellens

On 11 January 2017 Dr Mark Josephson passed away after a long illness. For a very long time Mark has been a unique friend leaving behind many special memories.

Mark and I met in 1978 when he came to Europe to attend a workshop on sudden cardiac death, organized by Henri Kulbertus and myself in Chateau de Colonster of the University of Liege, Belgium. I looked forward to meet him because of his recent work on ventricular tachycardia, a common area of interest.

An important topic during that meeting was to discuss new information coming from programmed stimulation of the heart in combination with intracardiac recordings. The use of that method was introduced in 1967 by Durrer in Amsterdam and by Coumel in Paris. I had the privilege to participate in these investigations in Amsterdam right from the beginning. Mark began using these methods around 1972.

At that time, it had become clear that in combination with a His Bundle recording, developed by Damato and Scherlag, programmed stimulation of the heart opened the door to obtain information about the site of origin and mechanisms of rhythm disturbances. This was soon followed by new therapeutic approaches. One of those was the surgery of cardiac arrhythmias in which Mark played an important role by localizing the site of origin of a ventricular tachycardia, which thereafter could be removed surgically.

Also, by re-examining the electrocardiogram (ECG) of an arrhythmia using information from intracardiac studies it became possible to markedly improve the diagnostic and therapeutic value of the ECG.

During the meeting with Mark in 1978 we had long discussions, not only about our findings during our stimulation studies, but also, on how to educate our younger colleagues in clinical electrophysiology and cardiac arrhythmia management.

We both had started a training program: Mark in Philadelphia, I in Maastricht, The Netherlands.

When Mark came to Maastricht in 1980 to participate in a workshop called ‘What is New in Electrocardiography’ we began to discuss combining our teaching efforts and on one of those evenings in my house, in front of the fireplace, we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of ECG tracings. From those we selected the best 50 for our first teaching course on complex cardiac arrhythmias.

The first course took place in 1981 in Monaco. One year later the course was inaugurated in the USA. In the 35 years that followed, two of us gave this 5 day course several times a year in the USA and Europe, with an additional 2-day course on intracardiac recordings, starting in 2001.

Teaching was the hallmark of Mark. Using his knowledge and enthusiasm, he taught thousands of cardiologists how to interpret the ECG correctly to the benefit of their patients.

Naturally during that time, I came to know Mark very well, this was soon followed by a special friendship between the Josephson and Wellens families. Mark became my best friend, not only during the courses, but also during our other activities, ranging from discussing what to read, where to eat, which wine to drink and occasionally, to argue about our score on the golf course.

One has only to read the book ‘The Josephson school’ (A legacy of important contributions to electrophysiology. Editors Wellens HJ, Buxton AE, Marchlinski FE, Zimetbaum P. Cardiotext, Minneapolis, 2015), written in recognition of Mark’s important contributions over 4 decades, to have an impression how peers and co-workers appreciated not only the significance of his work, but also their personal opinions about Mark as a person.

Two years ago, Mark was struck with an awful illness. This made me aware of another aspect of Mark. Despite his disease with its physical consequences and often unpleasant side effects of...
medication, Mark continued his activities in hospital and on the road in the teaching circuit. I admired the way how Mark, the fighter, stayed optimistic and how he handled his anxiety and worries.

One year later the horrible message came that Joan, Mark’s wife, was very seriously ill also, and we saw how the world of the Josephson’s fell apart. Then it became clear how close their family was and how well they supported one another in their grief.

Within half a year, the incredible occurred, both Joan and Mark passed away.

Mark was a unique person having many different qualities and strengths, as a doctor, clinical scientist, teacher, mentor, writer, and as a family man. I am grateful for his significance as a pioneer and teacher of modern cardiac arrhythmology.

But I will especially remember him as my best friend.