

Benjamin Lichtiger, MD, PhD, MBA, tells a story about Leading Leaders and the Institution

Dr. Lichtiger served as head of MD Anderson's Blood Bank and Transfusion services from 1974 until 2001. He served as Chair of the Department of Laboratory Medicine from 1999 until his retirement in 2008. In an interview conducted for the Dept. of Laboratory Medicine in 2017, he talks about Jose M. Trujillo, whom Dr. R. Lee Clark hired in 1962 to develop laboratory medicine and related research for MD Anderson.



Dr. Jose M. Trujillo's Vision for Laboratory Medicine

Dr. Trujillo was creative, very visionary. Pathology is too mechanical. You look at a tissue, yes tumor, no tumor. He envisioned that Lab Medicine was going to be the moving factor, engine, that's going to transform the treatment and management of cancer. He brought innovations to our department. Tumor markers. He took a trip with Dr. Fritsche to New York and talked to the creators or the inventors of the tumor markers and brought it here. One of the first institutions in the nation to use tumor markers for clinical diagnosis. He became very much involved with Dr. Freireich, because Dr. Trujillo was handling the cytogenetics and they started to develop the cytogenetic diagnosis of leukemia. Furthermore, in 1971 he got money and got the guy he hired -- that came out from the Pentagon in the development of a program to detect missiles-- hired him, and developed the first laboratory information system.

Dr. Clark had almost, I would say admiration for Joe. He used to say, "I need to talk to Joe," (laughs), okay? I always thought that Dr. Trujillo had a very great mind, the same as Dr. Clark, and they used to sit down and start talking about plans. And Clark used to tell him, "Joe, don't plan small things. Plan big." And Joe used to go up to him and talk to him, and Clark used to get the money for him to develop for the advantage of the institution and the advantage of the Department of Laboratory Medicine.

He saw the role of the Blood Bank. And he made tremendous strides because there were other institutions that wanted to gobble us up. He said, No. An institution like MD Anderson Cancer Center has to have its own supply of blood, and you cannot depend in competing with 85 other hospitals. And who is more important. MD Anderson with the whole cadre of leukemic patients waiting for platelets. So, thanks to him, we expanded the Blood Bank. Well we expanded microbiology, we expanded chemistry. We expanded cytogenetics. He went and developed the Molecular Testing Laboratory for diagnosis. Implemented here at MD Anderson, one of the first laboratories also in the country to use molecular testing for diagnosis.

He, being well known at NCI and being on their study sections, he used to tell his people, get involved in this line of research and developed the research arm. And those people flourished. Dr. Trujillo was a pusher. He wanted us to be on committees. He used to bring packages of grants and give it to us to read it, and then write the recommendation. If you were close to Trujillo, you had to work.

About this Content

This interview clip was taken from an in-depth interview conducted for the Making Cancer History Voices Oral History Project. This ongoing project currently contains almost 400 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

The content is available for all uses.

To explore the full interview go to: This interview is not yet available online. For information, contact Tacey A. Rosolowski, contact information below.

Interview Clip Identification:

Session date: 02-28-2017

Clip category: Leadership

Citations: Please provide the following information

Interview Subject's name, Clip Title, Date of Session, Historical Resources Center, Research Medical Library, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

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