

2013 Victor A. McKusick Leadership Award Addresses¹

Kurt Hirschhorn^{2,*} and Rochelle Hirschhorn^{3,*}



Photo courtesy of ASHG.

Kurt

It is with gratitude and humility that I thank The American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) and the Board of Directors for the incredible honor of awarding Rochelle and me the highly coveted Victor A. McKusick Leadership Award. The fact that the award is for both Rochelle and me makes it particularly sweet and gratifying. The wonderful introduction by our son, Joel Hirschhorn, adds even more joy to this wonderful occasion.

I first met Victor in 1968 at the completion of my second fellowship, this one in genetics in Sweden with Rochelle. My chief at the time, Dr. Charles Wilkinson, took me along to a meeting organized by Ted Puck for the purpose of discussing the goals and future of genetics in medicine. In attendance were a number of then current and future leaders in medical genetics, including several future recipients of the McKusick Award. It was the moment of birth of medical genetics when Victor predicted the future importance of genetics in medicine and for a growing number of patients and their families. At the age of 87, I can look back at the exponential growth in the field of human genetics and particularly at the incredible increase in the application of genetics and its exciting technologies for the benefit of patients and their families. Recognition as a leader in this effort is most gratifying, particularly as I proudly remember my over 50 trainees, many of whom have gone on to become division chiefs and chairs as leaders in their own right.

The McKusick Leadership Award is symbolic of the role of ASHG over the years. The Society itself and its members have collectively been the leaders in the field of human genetics. Their efforts relating to genetics in education, public policy, and social issues (a committee I founded when I was president of ASHG in 1969) have represented the leadership in these matters nationally and around the world. The growth and variation in the disciplines in human genetics have grown rapidly and widely. I am gratified that my plea in my Allan Award address¹ to not fragment ASHG into subspecialty societies has been heard over the years and that the field of human genetics has remained unified and become a powerful discipline.

The most important satisfaction in my life has been the wonderful development of my family of three children and seven grandchildren. You have met Joel this morning, and many of you have worked and published with him in our magnificent field. Our daughter Lisa has become a leader in her field of infectious disease, predominantly in the care of and the research benefitting the sufferers of the world-wide epidemic of AIDS. I am grateful for her presence here today. Our other daughter, a Harvard-trained lawyer, followed the profession of my father. Our grandchildren are succeeding in their chosen efforts, and I am very proud of them all. Most of all, my life would not be the same without my love, companion, collaborator, and supporter, my dear wife and corecipient of the McKusick Award, Dr. Rochelle Hirschhorn.

All in all, it has been a good life for a refugee kid who came here in 1940.

Rochelle

I am greatly honored to receive this leadership award, which carries the name of Victor McKusick. I introduced many of my medical students, fellows, and fellow physicians first to his early book on connective-tissue diseases and then to OMIM (Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man). To this day, I treasure the OMIM data that carry Victor's stamp, as well as recalling the occasions, albeit rare, that he consulted me for my opinion on a controversial matter. Another connection I have with Victor concerns my niece, Dr. Joan Reibman, now a tenured professor at the New York University School of Medicine.

¹This article is based on the address given by the author at the meeting of The American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) on October 26, 2013, in Boston, MA, USA. The audio of the original address can be found at the ASHG website.

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While she was a student at Johns Hopkins, she talked about her amazing chairman of the Department of Medicine, who could simultaneously correct an OMIM entry and advise her fully and well as to her best choices for internship.

This brings me to the topic of women in science and medicine. As my son, Joel, noted in his introduction, I was the first woman in over 80 years to be elected to the Interurban Clinical Club, founded by Sir William Osler. The rumor was that Osler was turning in his grave when the first woman became a member. When I was elected, and later when I became president of the club, I did what I said I would do—nominate outstanding women for membership. At my first dinner, I was on a sabbatical at Harvard. When I arrived, straight from the laboratory, the bartender (who was African American) said, “there aren’t many of you here,” and I thought, “there are not many of you here either”—and that aspect of diversity remains a problem today.

I learned from my parents to take for granted the intellectual and physical role of women as full-fledged members of society—and they took it for granted that I would have a career. My parents came to the United States in 1929 from a kibbutz in what was then Palestine, where my mother

slept in a tent and put aside her Ukrainian university background to do manual work building a farm. My father was a founder and a leader of the first kibbutz, built on the principle of equality.

I’ve spent much of my career working on genetic disorders that were at one time universally fatal. I’ve been fortunate enough to see these diseases become treatable.

Much of my work, achievement, and success at leadership have been made easier to achieve because of the constant support and encouragement by my husband, Kurt, throughout our long and collaborative work and family life together. I want to express my sincere gratitude to ASHG for this wonderful honor.

Web Resources

The URL for data presented herein is as follows:

Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man (OMIM), www.omim.org

References

1. Hirschhorn, K. (1996). 1995 William Allan Award address. Human genetics: a discipline at risk for fragmentation. *Am. J. Hum. Genet.* 58, 1–6.