

Dear GBPSR members,

PSR founder, Dr. Bernard (“Bernie”) Lown, died on Tuesday at his home in Newton at age 99. I have pulled together here the thoughts and reflections of a few of our PSR colleagues who knew him best. For those who would like to read those recollections in their entirety, they are included at the end of this letter.



Dr. Lown is described by his friend, colleague and fellow Nobel Laureate Dr. James Muller as “a great clinician, inventor, teacher and peace activist.” Muller shared in an email, “I think his IPPNW leadership in Geneva in 1980 and in DC in 1981 were extraordinary moments of courage and skillful, dedicated leadership. Humanity is his beneficiary.”

Dr. Lown spoke out on some of the most controversial issues of his day: racism in medicine; the corporatization of medicine that was driving the overdiagnosis and overtreatment of myriad conditions; the need for medical treatment of children trapped in war zones; and universal access to insurance coverage and to medical knowledge. He formed many groups and his own foundation to address them. But a signal issue for him was the nuclear arms race, which he considered an urgent public health threat to human existence.

Lown was inspired by a talk given in Cambridge in 1961 by Nobel laureate, Sir Philip John Noel, who warned of the as yet unknown health effects of nuclear weapons development. Noel spoke of the concerning finding of strontium-90, a known radioactive carcinogen associated with nuclear testing, in babies teeth at levels 50 times higher than earlier baselines. Noel also likely addressed the immorality of nuclear war, as he did here in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1959:

“When Hitler was exterminating seven million Jews in Poland, we had millions of German prisoners in our hands; we did not kill them; we took no reprisals of any kind. But now governments are constantly asserting that if they or their allies are attacked, they will instantly reply with weapons that will wipe out tens of millions of men and women and little children, who may bear no shadow of personal responsibility for what their government has done. What is left of the morality on which our Western civilization has been built? How can we end the arms race?”

Following the talk, Lown invited his colleagues to meet informally in his living room. “I think we have a social responsibility” to speak out on this issue, he said. And so was born Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Part of the brilliance of Dr. Lown and his colleagues was that they translated the issue into terms that were easily understandable both to fellow physicians and the lay public. They published a series of five articles in *The New England Journal of Medicine* showing what would happen if a 20 megaton atomic bomb fell on Boston: Boston would become a 4 mile crater, and Newton, where Lown lived, and surrounding suburbs, would be incinerated — bomb shelters included. Three million would be expected to die, either from the direct blast or aftereffects. Medical care would be unavailable, since hospitals as far away as Emerson would be incapacitated or decimated and because many caregivers would die in the blast. PSR’s advocacy around nuclear testing was also effective: posters

were distributed that read "Cease Nuclear Testing" on a prescription pad; a worldwide "Cease Fire" campaign protested every reported nuclear test by any country. Their successful advocacy led to an atmospheric, underwater and outer space nuclear weapons testing ban — although underground testing was still allowed.

In the early 1980s, as the nuclear weapons race heated up again and the number of nuclear weapons worldwide ballooned to over 60,000, Lown helped launch an international group called International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, whose membership grew over five years to 200,000 members in 40 countries. The group demanded a verifiable freeze on the development and deployment of all nuclear weapons and a declaration of "no first use" by the world's nuclear powers. For their efforts to educate the world about the risks of nuclear weapons, Lown and his American and Russian physician colleagues shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985.



**Dr. Lown with former GBPSR Board Chair Dr. Bivens  
at the Lown home in Newton, fall 2018**

*Photo credit: Anna Baker*

What did Dr. Lown accomplish? According to Dr. Jim Muller, one of his most concrete accomplishments was decreasing the number of nuclear weapons from 60,000 in 1980 to 15,000 today. But he also changed the conversation around nuclear weapons, emphasizing that these weapons increased international tensions and instability; they were not a deterrent to war, but rather increased the risk of war, and in particular, a catastrophic nuclear accident; and they increased this danger to such an extent that they represented a significant health risk in and of themselves. Most important, Dr. Lown made clear that nuclear war was another form of genocide: in an interview in 2008 with NPR reporter Bruce Gellerman, he says, "A nuclear weapon is an instrument of genocide, it's not a weapon of war. Whom does it kill? It kills not only people, culture, environment. It destroys everything. Such a weapon is a Hitlerite weapon and we democratic people with a deep moral sense that we pride ourselves have such weapons stockpiled?"

He also underscored the destructive effect of runaway military spending, particularly the ballooning nuclear weapons budgets, on American well-being, since those expenditures leached money away

from essential investments in infrastructure, education, and medicine. He emphasized what he called these “misplaced priorities” when he chatted with GBPSR Executive Director Anna Baker and then Chair Dr. Matt Bivens in [this video](#) in 2018.

Lown’s advocacy around the risks of nuclear weapons was steadfast: in the January 21, 2021 issue of NEJM, he continued to entreat his medical colleagues “to demand the elimination of these genocidal weapons as the only possible means to prevent global holocaust.”

In addition, Dr. Lown was accomplished in his own field of cardiology as a researcher, inventing the defibrillator (his defibrillator would be put to use at the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, successfully resuscitating a Soviet journalist) and he pioneered the use of lidocaine to treat cardiac arrhythmias.

Above all, he took tremendous pride in his clinical skills: according to colleagues, he was a superlative clinician, modeling compassion and warmth at the bedside that made him revered by patients. His ability to connect and his emphasis on the patient-clinician relationship were recognized in this [recent article](#) by cardiologist and PSR member Dr. Michael Rocha.

But his greatest gift may have been to create a new mindset among physicians: he understood that voicing concerns publicly about matters of human health did not come easily to the medical profession, but encouraged his colleagues nonetheless to speak out. He reframed the conversation, helping the medical community recognize that speaking up is not “political” but rather part of the medical oath, since “no single group is as deeply involved in and committed to the survival of mankind,” as he and his coauthors wrote in their 1962 NEJM article. Speaking out about the health risks of nuclear war in particular was essential to protecting our patients and our families.

Dr. Lown leaves an indelible mark: his tireless advocacy and formidable accomplishments will survive him, continuing to speak to thousands of physicians and community members around the globe: “I didn’t view myself other than a doctor who’s trying to heal a sick planet,” he said. We at Greater Boston PSR will continue to carry his work forward.

I will end with Dr. Lown’s words: “Perhaps the most important lesson in the doctors’ anti-nuclear campaign is the sense of hard-headed optimism. Against impossible odds, a small cadre of passionately committed physicians roused multitudes.”

Yours in the common pursuit,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Lown".



Brita E. Lundberg, M.D.

Chair of the Board

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### **Memories of Dr. Bernard Lown**

Notes by: Anna Linakis Baker

Executive Director, Greater Boston PSR

Dr. Matt Bivens and I were fortunate to be invited to Dr. Lown's home in Newton in the fall of 2018. It was a memorable visit. At nearly 98 years old, Dr. Lown's mind was exceptionally sharp. His history and experiences are astounding. He spoke about his interactions with various American Presidents and his meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev. He told us about the experience he had that inspired him to develop the defibrillator. He was intrigued by Dr. Matt Bivens' experiences in Russia, particularly since Matt had worked there as a journalist. He underscored his deep concern with the military-industrial complex in our country, and wanted to ensure that we continue to encourage medical professionals to organize because "organizations like PSR and IPPNW are more necessary now than they were 50 years ago".

### **Dr. Bernard Lown: Memories of Heroism**

Notes by Jim Muller MD

Cardiologist, Brigham and Women's Hospital

Senior Lecturer, Harvard Medical School

The world has lost a great clinician, inventor, teacher and peace activist. I had the honor of being a student of Dr. Lown's in the Coronary Care Unit at the Brigham. I was amazed by his skill in the scientific and personal care of patients.

In 1980, I had the privilege, with Dr. Eric Chivian, of travelling with Dr. Lown to Geneva, Switzerland for the founding of International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). The three day meeting was very tense as we and the Russians learned how to unite against nuclear weapons while continuing to disagree on many other issues. The personal relationship of Dr. Lown with Dr. Chazov, the physician of the Soviet leaders, was an essential ingredient for the formation of IPPNW.

I remember a moment in DC in 1981 at the first IPPNW world congress of over 10 nations. Our convention was deadlocked over the topic of a letter to President Reagan and Premier Brezhnev. The Russians wanted to send the letter-- but a large group of US MDs did not because it would alienate Reagan and might appear to be Soviet propaganda. The day before the press conference at 3 in the morning as the dispute raged, Dr. Lown said "We will send the letters. Those who oppose need not sign." The next day the letters calling for both leaders to end the arms race reached the world. At that moment there were over 60,000 nuclear weapons. Today there are 15,000, and while one nuclear weapon is too many, the trend was reversed as the IPPNW message continued to spread worldwide, reaching a milestone with the 1985 award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

While there were many peak moments for Dr. Lown, I think his IPPNW leadership in Geneva in 1980 and in DC in 1981 were extraordinary moments of courage and skillful, dedicated leadership. Humanity is his beneficiary.

As will all who knew him, I will miss him greatly and treasure the moments when I was able to observe his heroic acts.

### **Memories of Dr. Bernard Lown**

Notes by Dr. John Pastore  
Professor, Tufts University School of Medicine

A side of Bernard that many didn't have the chance to see was his sense of humor and playfulness. I always thought it kept him sane while tackling the heavy issues, like nuclear disarmament.

Once, he and I were flying together from Boston to Washington for a private meeting with Russian diplomats at their embassy. The goal was to push them on nuclear weapons abolition. Our plane circled DC in a fog before being diverted to Richmond (VA), where it landed, and I then drove us in a rental car to Washington for our meeting.

All of this delay time, which could have been boring but also stressful, Bernard entertained me by reading jokes that he kept in a small book in his jacket pocket. He delighted in his tiny encyclopedia of jokes, and told me that whenever he heard a good one, he would save it in that small book. I remember some of them to this day!

He was a delightful raconteur and it was impossible to be bored in his presence.

### **Memories of Dr. Bernard Lown**

Notes by: Dr. Ira Helfand  
Co-Founder and Past President of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR)  
Co-President of International Physicians for Social Responsibility (IPPNW)

I first met Dr. Lown in the summer of 1979 shortly after we had founded what became the modern PSR and discovered this organization with a similar mission in the early 1960's. We were focused then on the medical dangers of nuclear power and Dr. Lown invited a group of us to his house. I had just moved back to NY to do my senior residency, as it was called in those days, at Montefiore, and had to get permission from my attending to miss rounds the next morning.

Dr. Lown told us that he understood the problem with nuclear power but that frankly that was not what we should be worrying about and directed us to the series of articles from the May 1962 NEJM that were the foundational work of PSR. We read them and agreed he was right and changed the focus of the new group to the prevention of nuclear war.

### **Memories of Dr. Bernard Lown**

Notes by: Dr. Richard Clapp

Former Chair of the Board, Greater Boston PSR

Professor Emeritus, Boston University School of Public Health

"At a joint GBPSR / IPPNW fund-raiser back in 2005, we honored Dr. Lown and Daniel Ellsberg, who was the principal speaker at an event at Harvard. Dr. Lown and I grew up in the same home town: Lewiston, Maine. There's a Bernard Lown "Peace Bridge" across the river to an adjacent town. This was in recognition of his work to join with Soviet counterparts and build support for nuclear disarmament. Dr. Lown's family and my family also both had summer camps on a small lake in Monmouth, Maine for many years. I met him when I interviewed for a job at IPPNW in the early 1980s, but followed his amazing career from my vantage point in public health in Boston. He was a world historical figure for multiple reasons."