

Dr. Joel J. Nobel
A Man on a Mission
A Mentor, and A Valued Friend and Colleague

When I met Dr. Joel Nobel at ECRI I was fresh out of college in 1975 and he was about 40 years old. He was clearly a "Man on a Mission" to save patients from pain and injury from defective medical devices, and to improve the efficiency and efficacy of healthcare. In retrospect, I now know that Joel was decades ahead of his time, and I learned that did not deter him one little bit!

The good Doctor handed each of ECRI's new engineering recruits in the 70's a loose-leaf binder chock full of rigorous Employee Handbook rules and a bright red Swiss Army knife, and threw each of us into an unknown sector of medical technology investigation with a mandate to learn the scientific, engineering, and medical principles, find the flaws in each product, identify constructive remedies where possible, write up our reports, submit to daunting internal scientific and peer review, publish our results, and then present our findings in public conferences. TALL order for 21-year olds on their first jobs, but Joel's faith in us, and his firm direction and discipline, allowed an awful lot of us to succeed beyond our wildest dreams!

I have to laugh to myself for the trust Joel placed in each of us as such young ages. In only a few years, many of us found ourselves presenting keynote speeches on his behalf at national and international scientific and medical sessions, and most of us had little more than a Bachelor's Degree and Dr. Nobel's say-so to back us up. As he sagely told me while calming my jitters before one of my first national debuts, "Just stick to what you know, Elliot, and don't let anyone draw you onto their turf. You know more about that product than anyone else in the nation, so stick to your guns."

I have to admit that Dr. Nobel was never easy to keep up with. He seemed to sleep but a couple of hours a night, and regardless of your medical, engineering, scientific, or legal specialty his habit of endless reading and his sharp, critical mind ensured that everyone needed to bring his or her "A-game" when you talked to him. Holidays and vacations seemed of little interest to him unless tied to a working mission or project, and the concept of retirement seemed unfathomable. Dr. Nobel never, ever sat still, and tracking him down around the globe was a challenge until the end! Not sure most of us would trade our own lives for his, but that was a choice that afforded him the constant cultural and scientific renewal and impact that made him tick.

I still hearken too many of the rules and explanations in that Employee Handbook, even though I've not been an employee at ECRI Institute for 25 years. Pearls like "a non-profit organization is not like most other corporations" as he tried to make it clear to everyone that ECRI's public mission and integrity took precedent over profit or rewards. Firm guidelines about spending funds as frugally as if they were your own personal money regardless of the situation, and incredibly restrictive conflict-of-interest and disclosure rules for each and every employee are today embedded in IRS and FDA guidelines and their peers around the world. I, and the non-profit organizations that I lead strive to live up to those requirements each and every day!

When I talked to Dr. Nobel as recently as last year, he had lost none of his missionary bravado, focus, or acuity, and his global treks were only limited by the wear and tear of travel. No country was too small, and no slice of society was unworthy of his time and attention. Unfortunately, though blessed with a brilliant mind and visionary perspective, his solid, stocky body turned out to be less robust than his intellect. Though I probably had close to a foot of height advantage over him, he was never less than a giant in my mind. I am sure that I won't be the only one to remember him that way, either!

You will certainly read of Dr. Nobel's accomplishments in the future, but I can tell you first hand that most of the accounts will be humble re-telling of a legacy that did -- and will continue to -- improve healthcare around the planet in remarkable and important ways. In the early days, half or more of the medical devices his engineers tested were at best mediocre, and many were a threat to life and/or limb. Today, though, most such testing reveals good-to-excellent products in the US market that are differentiated on features, price, and preference. That is quite an achievement, and it was won one year at a time relying on Dr. Nobel's commitment to "The Discipline of Science." and "The Integrity of Independence." That is the current marketing byline that the ECRI Institute that Joel founded, and it speaks volumes about the organizations ongoing mission.

Personally, few will know of Joel's wry humor and bent towards practical jokes, and few will know just how far he would go to help a younger engineer or physician develop a successful career. I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for his training, discipline, and visionary leadership, and can honestly help say that Dr. Nobel helped shape my career and life.

There are probably several other hundreds of my peers around the world -- younger and older -- who will have similar recollections and feelings, and I hope they all eventually say their piece. To me, early in my career Joel was like a second father, and leaving him and ECRI to expand my own career was not an easy decision for me to make in 1990, but he knew, too, that it was time for me to move on, and his friendship and support for me and many others proved to be unending.

Farewell my dear friend. We will all miss you, but many of us will continue to do our best to honor you courage, vision, and insight. Honor and respect are due. Rest in peace, good Samurai, and soar joyously into the winds and in our memories for eternity.