The Author of That Book You Read

You’ve heard his name. And if you’re a student, you’re likely reading his book in your nuclear pharmacy elective. Oh, you’re a practitioner? Then you’ve probably already read the book, cover-to-cover, several times.

Radiopharmaceuticals in Nuclear Pharmacy and Nuclear Medicine is the book, and Richard Kowalsky is the guy.

Dick Kowalsky graduated from the University of Connecticut School of Pharmacy in 1966 with a Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy, and after he completed a one-year post-graduate internship at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in West Haven, CT, he enlisted with the United States Public Health Service as the pharmacy officer at the Indian Hospital in Pawnee, Oklahoma. When he started with the Public Health Service, he was their first pharmacist. Making rounds with physicians, counseling patients in clinics, and teaching nurses about drugs, he spent his days practicing as a clinical pharmacist. The more he learned about clinical pharmacy, the more excited he became to learn even more.

To further his education in clinical pharmacy, Dr. Kowalsky pursued a 3-year combined Hospital Pharmacy Residency and Doctor of Pharmacy program at the University of Kentucky. During this time, he was introduced to nuclear medicine through his rounds with radiology physicians, and he started learning about radiopharmacy. “I decided I wanted to be a radiopharmacist, so I designed my own program.” By this, he means that in addition to the required clinical pharmacy courses, he attended classes in radiochemistry, radiobiology, radiation physics, and other courses offered to radiology residents. And that’s not all. When he wasn’t in class, he was focused on his project – a project no other pharmacy resident selected – radiolabeling albumin with Tc-99m. Although the pharmacy department at the University of Kentucky contained a Tc-99m generator, there were only two radiopharmaceuticals approved for use at the time: sodium pertechnetate and sulfur colloid. But he was eager to know more, and he describes how in between pharmacy classes, residency assignments, and shifts at the hospital, he “learned radiopharmacy from the Journal of Nuclear Medicine.” Coincidentally, this is also when he learned to drink coffee.
When he graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1972, he accepted a position at the University of North Carolina. Dr. Kowalsky explains that this opportunity was perfect for him, as it allowed him to teach radiopharmacy classes while continuing to practice as a nuclear pharmacist in the hospital. He stresses the importance of being able to bring concepts from contemporary clinical practice into the classroom. And that, he did. His faculty position with UNC started with an elective course in nuclear pharmacy, and it gradually developed into the Authorized Nuclear Pharmacist program that is offered today.

Forty-one years. The length of time Dr. Kowalsky has devoted to his current appointments at the University of North Carolina’s Schools of Pharmacy and Medicine. At the Eshelman School of Pharmacy, he not only directs the Authorized Nuclear Pharmacist program, but also, he serves as the Director of Radiopharmacy and precepts pharmacy students in the hospital’s USP-797-compliant nuclear pharmacy. Through the School of Medicine, he teaches in the Nuclear Medicine Technology program and lectures a course in radiopharmaceuticals to UNC radiology residents. The mentorships he develops with his students have become a cherished part of his job. He tells me that he enjoys getting to know his students on a personal level and watching them grow into professionals.

Okay, so somehow, we’ve discussed his entire pharmacy career, but I feel I’m forgetting to ask him something. Oh, yes, the book. That book you’ve read (and studied and highlighted and color-coded). “Tell me about the book,” I nudge. He nonchalantly replies, “Well, the dean [of the University of Kentucky Pharmacy School] told us we were going to be the future leaders and doing famous things and writing textbooks.” He laughs as though it seemed like a far-fetched idea at the time. Flash-forward a decade. Dr. Sheldon Baum, the Director of Nuclear Medicine at Hershey Medical Center, invited Dr. Kowalsky to provide a series of radiopharmaceutical lectures. Dr. Baum was the editor of several nuclear medicine textbooks for Appleton and Lange Publishing, and he inquired about Dick writing a textbook on radiopharmaceuticals. Dr. Kowalsky agreed, and Radiopharmaceuticals in Nuclear Medicine Practice was published in 1987. Fact: He and Dr. Randolph Perry wrote the first edition from scratch, and it took nearly four years to complete. Although the book was widely popular among nuclear pharmacists, Appleton and Lange Publishing was not interested in pursuing a second edition.

Flash-forward another decade. APhA wanted to publish a textbook on radiopharmaceuticals and contacted Stan Shaw at Purdue University, who directed the organization to Dr. Kowalsky. Because the field of nuclear pharmacy (particularly, technetium chemistry) had advanced drastically since the first edition was published, Dick tells me that he “spent hours in the chemistry library” ensuring that the second edition was as accurate as the first. APhA published Radiopharmaceuticals in Nuclear Pharmacy and Nuclear Medicine as the second edition in 2004, and the third (and most recent) edition in 2011.

Dr. Kowalsky insisted that the textbook encompass all the topics needed for Authorized Nuclear Pharmacist training. Each edition was divided into two main sections: basic radiation science topics and clinical application of radiopharmaceuticals in practice. While he wrote a majority of the book, he enlisted the help of a nuclear medicine physician, Dr. Steven Falen, to co-author the section on clinical practice. The more the field of nuclear pharmacy advanced, the more topics were required to ensure the book continued to be a comprehensive resource. The latest edition includes more participation of outside authors, an additional section on PET, and...
as Dick says, “more color and nicer pages.” Dick tells me that he is proud that his book has been so widely used by students and that he is thankful for the efforts of those involved.

Dr. Kowalsky has been an active member of APhA and the Nuclear Pharmacy Practice SIG since 1977. Since that time, he has served on numerous committees, chaired both the Scientific Program and the Educational Affairs Committees, and chaired the Nuclear Section. In addition to his service with APhA, he has held appointments with the Southeast Chapter of the Society of Nuclear Medicine and the Board of Pharmaceutical Specialties (BPS). During his tenure as Chair of the Nuclear Pharmacy Specialty Council of BPS, Dr. Kowalsky and his colleagues successfully petitioned BPS to approve UNM’s Continuing Education program for BCNP recertification.

Because of his commitment to the profession, he was recognized as an APhA Fellow in 1995, was the winner of the William H. Briner Distinguished Achievement Award in 2000, and was deemed one of the Top 40 Nuclear Pharmacy Pioneers by APhA in 2000. When asked what it means to him to be considered a pioneer in the field, he humbly tells me that he considers it “a privilege and an honor to be a part of the [nuclear] section, especially during the time of its establishment.” He continues by describing how he dedicated the first chapter of his textbook to following the course of nuclear pharmacy from its beginnings and to identifying those practitioners who were instrumental in its development as the first pharmacy specialty.

Outside his career as a nuclear pharmacist, he found time to devote to his community by volunteering with the Habitat for Humanity, serving on numerous committees at his church, and currently is mentoring a young boy in the area. He also enjoys landscaping and cultivating his garden, amateur photography, and fingerpicking folk and bluegrass tunes on the guitar.

He boasts that his life “isn’t 100 percent pharmacy,” and that it is “important to use both sides of the brain.” But one might argue that one of his past-times uses the same side of the brain that his day-job uses: homemade beer brewing – brown ale, pale ale, and a lager, to be exact. Before I could even ask if he had achieved connoisseur status, he quickly informed me that his long-time friend and neighbor, “Neil Petry, can attest to the quality of it,” and that he is likely more famous for beer making than he is for nuclear pharmacy. Oktoberfest at Kowalsky’s place? Who’s in?

His advice to you: “If you have the opportunity, take a job somewhere to get yourself established in nuclear pharmacy. Leave your nest and find somewhere with different people.” He explains that his career started with the Public Health Service in Oklahoma. His position there piqued his interest first in clinical pharmacy, and ultimately led him to nuclear pharmacy and his career at UNC. Forty-one years later, he’s still with the university . . . because he is doing what he loves. And, ultimately, he recommends you do the same: “do what you want to do, what you love. It will improve your chances for a satisfying career and a happy life.”

Until next time,

Ashley Mishoe