In 2003, we were saddened by the loss of one of the great pioneers of critical care medicine: Peter Safar. He opened the first physician-staffed medical/surgical intensive care unit in the United States, and he also started the first multidisciplinary critical care medicine fellowship program in the world. A strong believer in nursing education, Safar placed nurses on the faculty of all the national critical care programs for which he was responsible. He was one of the physicians chosen to review the first CCRN examination. A wide-ranging prophet, he believed that critical care is not bound by the walls of an intensive care unit, but rather it is a discipline that begins in the community when a patient becomes acutely ill.

Safar is justly credited as the founder of modern cardiopulmonary resuscitation and cardiopulmonary cerebral resuscitation. His introduction of the need for training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation began in Pennsylvania at a time when it was more difficult to obtain a license to cut hair than to be an ambulance driver responsible for the transportation of critically ill patients.

Safar’s interests extended much further than resuscitation. He was a consultant in disaster medicine for the US Army and a founding member of the Club of Mainz, one of the first significant groups in the field of international disaster medicine originally organized by his old friend, the late Rudolf Frey, another internationally renowned physician.

Safar was born on April 24, 1924, in Austria. He received his medical degree from the University of Vienna. He continued his Austrian training as a resident in surgery and pathology, and then attended Yale for a fellowship in surgery-oncology. From 1950 to 1952, he studied anesthesiology at the University of Pennsylvania. He served as chief of the department of anesthesiology at the National Cancer Hospital in Lima, Perú, and returned to the United States in 1956 to join the faculty of the department of anesthesiology at Johns Hopkins University as an assistant professor while also serving as chief of anesthesiology at Baltimore City Hospital.

In 1961, Safar was appointed the first chairman of the department of anesthesiology/critical care medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1978, he retired from his position as department chairman, but he continued to be an active member of the department until his death, working on the development of his famous International Resuscitation Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh, which now bears his name. His last published article, which appeared a month before he died, was on the value of lowering body temperature to preserve cerebral function in patients after resuscitation from cardiac arrest.

Most of us who knew Peter Safar will remember his exceptionally quick wit and wise counsel, his intolerance of nonsense and dishonesty, his unswerving perseverance to improve acute care throughout the community, his interest in the people around him, his friendship and support, and, above all, the incredible dynamism with which he conducted his life. Our sympathies go out to his wife, Eva, and their sons and grandchildren. We shall all miss him dearly.

PIONEER OF CRITICAL CARE MEDICINE: PETER SAFAR (1924-2003)

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