

Mortimer M. Bortin, MD

March 7, 1922 – July 25, 1994

Dr. Mortimer M. Bortin was a pioneer in bone marrow transplantation.

According to a *Milwaukee Sentinel* article dated July 26, 1994:

Bortin, of Milwaukee, graduated from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and went on to Marquette Medical School, where he graduated in the mid-1940s.

Bortin began his career specializing in internal medicine, concentrating on kidney disease.

While on staff at Mount Sinai Hospital in Milwaukee, he began researching kidney transplants in animals. In the mid-1960s, he and another surgeon performed two of the first kidney transplants in humans. Both were successful.

Bortin was soon named director of the Winter Research Laboratory at Mount Sinai and received the largest single grant the American Cancer Society had ever awarded to a Milwaukee scientist.

After further kidney transplant research, Bortin changed his focus to a related matter, bone marrow transplants.

He began researching the procedure and was part of the team of doctors that performed the first successful bone marrow transplantation in a human in 1968.

The 2-year-old boy who was the recipient of the transplant was cured of his disease... .

In 1970, Bortin founded the International Bone Marrow Transplant Registry (IBMTR) at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He acted as the director of the registry until 1992.

“He was such an unselfish researcher,” said Mary Horowitz, the current director of the marrow transplant registry. “He was a leader in this field and made major contributions to the advancement of bone marrow transplantations. The medical community owes him a debt of gratitude for the work he did.”

And, remembering Bortin, Dr. Robert Gale wrote:

Mort Bortin was an unusual person. Although he started his professional life as an internist, and a good one, he quickly realized that many of the issues that interested him, like fetal liver transplants and graft-versus-leukemia,



could only (at that time) be addressed by studies in animals. Over the next several years Mort increasingly focused his efforts on laboratory studies of the immune response to leukemia. When bone marrow transplantation became possible in humans, Mort was ready to apply his laboratory experience at the bedside, participating in one of the first successful transplants. Mort was also quick to realize that scientific progress would depend on collecting and carefully analyzing the world's transplant experience. To this end, he and a few colleagues established the International Bone Marrow Transplant Registry. For 22 years Mort was the IBMTR's Scientific Director. Under his leadership it grew into a premier example of international scientific collaboration, with data for over 20,000 transplants performed by more than 270 teams in 44 countries.

Mort's contributions to experimental hematology and bone marrow transplantation are too extensive to fully enumerate. In addition to the IBMTR, Mort also helped found the International Society for Experimental Hematology and its journal, *Experimental Hematology*. He published more than 500 scientific papers and was on the editorial boards of several scientific journals. He served his country in the armed forces and as a member of several advisory and review boards of the National Institutes of Health and the American College of Surgeons. He was the recipient of numerous awards, including the French Ordre des Coteaux.

Mort did not suffer fools gladly and had no tolerance for dishonesty or disloyalty. However his enthusiasm for good scientists and good science knew no boundaries; his auto license plate was GVL GVH. He liked to quote Milton: "There is none more likely to be disbelieved than TRUTH itself, whose first appearance to our eyes, bleared and dimmed with prejudice and custom, is more unsightly and implausible than many errors." He was a master teacher, passing on his uncompromisingly high standards and enthusiasm for the pursuit of truth to many scientists.

Although Mort performed few transplants, he surely saved more lives than most of us by his careful studies and contributions to the field. We, and all those benefitting from his extraordinary contributions, shall miss him.