ROBERT JOY GLASER

11 SEPTEMBER 1918 - 7 JUNE 2012
ROBERT JOY GLASER, M.D., a national figure in medical education and administration, died 7 June 2012 at his home in Palo Alto, California, surrounded by his family. Glaser, whose health had declined in recent years, was ninety-three.

Throughout a career that spanned more than half a century, Glaser worked to improve medical education and support health-related research. As a top administrator at medical schools at Washington University, Harvard University, the University of Colorado, and Stanford University, and as a board member in philanthropic foundations, he shaped the careers of hundreds of physicians and scientists.

Glaser was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. After attending city public schools he enrolled at Harvard College, where he received his undergraduate degree in 1940 and an M.D. degree magna cum laude from Harvard Medical School in 1943. Although he was planning to intern at a Harvard teaching hospital, he was invited by Dr. W. Barry Wood Jr., head of the Department of Medicine at Washington University, to take his internship at that university’s Barnes Hospital. After completing the internship year, Glaser returned to Boston as an assistant resident at Harvard’s Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, but, having been impressed with the Barnes-Washington University program, he accepted Dr. Wood’s invitation to return to the Washington University School of Medicine as senior assistant resident and later chief resident on the medical service.

After two years as a National Research Council fellow, during which he began his long-term studies on Group A streptococcal infections and their relation to rheumatic fever, Dr. Glaser joined the Washington University School of Medicine faculty in 1949 as an instructor of medicine. Over the next few years, he held the titles of associate professor of medicine, chief of the Division of Immunology and of the Rheumatic Fever Clinic, and associate dean and chairman of the Committee on Admissions.

While at Barnes Hospital, his “wandering eye fixed on an attractive young woman in the senior class,” he wrote in his Harvard twenty-fifth reunion memoir. Helen Hofsommer, a soon-to-be pediatrician, would become his wife of fifty years, during which she raised a family of three children and maintained a psychiatry practice in Palo Alto until her death in 1999.

In 1957, at age thirty-eight, Glaser was recruited to be dean of the University of Colorado Medical School. He also served as vice president for medical affairs, playing a key role in promoting and completing a new medical school hospital complex in Denver. In 1963, Glaser returned to Harvard to lead the Affiliated Hospitals Center Inc., an ambitious $50 million merger of six Harvard-affiliated teaching hospitals.
Robert Joy Glaser

He simultaneously held a chair in social medicine and taught in the Department of Medicine. Two years later, Glaser came to Stanford University to assume the position of vice president for medical affairs, dean of the medical school, and professor of medicine. At Stanford, he is credited with having engineered a solution to the contentious issues concerning joint ownership of the Stanford/Palo Alto Hospital by purchasing the city’s share, thereby making way for the Stanford University Medical Center of today. That accomplishment dramatically changed the hospital environment and teaching programs and improved relations with community physicians.

At Stanford Medical School, Glaser oversaw major changes in the curriculum designed to give students greater flexibility and laid the foundation for the growth of its basic sciences programs, helping it to emerge as a world-class, research-intensive enterprise. His tenure as dean encompassed the troubled and disruptive times on campus during the Vietnam War. Protests, demonstrations, and canceled classes were everyday events, but his calmness and fairness in the face of provocations helped keep the medical school operational while the rest of the campus was consumed with sit-ins and other forms of disruption. In 1968, he was tapped to serve as acting president of Stanford University following the retirement of J. E. Wallace Sterling. While at Stanford, he became recognized as a national leader in medical education and medical care. During this period, he was a founding member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences and the first chairman of the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Leaving full-time academia, Glaser moved to New York in 1970 to serve as vice president and trustee at the Commonwealth Fund, a New York–based philanthropy devoted to improving health care. Two years later, he returned to California to head the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation from 1972 through 1983. At the time he quipped that he was going to see whether it’s better to give than to receive. From 1984 to 1997, Dr. Glaser served as director of medical science and as a member of the board of trustees of the Lucille P. Markey Charitable Trust, which provided basic biomedical research grants totaling $500 million in support of medical science research, until its scheduled closing in 1997. From Glaser’s long experience at academic medical centers, he appreciated the need for identifying and nurturing promising young investigators in their formative years. To meet that need, he established the Markey Scholars Program, which provided generous support for five years to be used by scholars at the institutions of their choice. It was a brilliant vision and initiative. Being chosen a Markey Scholar was a notable achievement. Not surprisingly, many of today’s leaders in academic medicine were Markey Scholars.
Glaser also had a long-term involvement with the Palo Alto Medical Foundation. Initially engaged through its research institute, in 1981 he became a founding member of its board of trustees and continued as an emeritus trustee through 2008. A member of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, he served on its board of directors and as the editor from 1962 to 1997 of its scholarly journal, *The Pharoos*. He also was active nationally in medical education through the Association of American Medical Colleges and served on the National Advisory Committee on Higher Education, which explored the relationship between universities and the federal government. He served on the boards of many organizations, including Washington University, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Packard Humanities Institute, the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation, the Kaiser Hospitals and Health Plan, Hewlett-Packard, and ALZA Corporation.

Glaser received many awards and honors, including the Abraham Flexner Medal for Distinguished Service to Medical Education from the Association of American Medical Colleges, the Dean’s Medal from the Stanford School of Medicine, the Dean’s Medal from the Harvard Medical School, and the Harvard Medal for Distinguished Service. He published more than 135 articles on medical education, health care, rheumatic fever, and streptococcal infections.

Among his honors and awards are ten honorary degrees (including those from Washington University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Colorado, and the Watson School of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory); the Stearns Award for Lifetime Achievement in Medicine from the New York Academy of Medicine; the Hubert H. Humphrey Cancer Research Center Award; and the Harvard Club of San Francisco Distinguished Citizen Award for Outstanding Leadership of Medical Education and Research. In 1986, the Robert J. Glaser Award was established by the Society for Research and Education in Primary Care Internal Medicine in recognition of his leadership in revitalizing general internal medicine. In 1998, he received the William Greenleaf Eliot Society Award, Washington University’s most prestigious honor. In addition, he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; and a master of the American College of Physicians and the Royal College of Physicians of London.

Those who knew Glaser personally found him to be a man of great energy, high standards, and sincere care for those with whom he worked. He shared his love of building enterprises involving people with extraordinary talent brought together for a common purpose. He sought strategies for breaking down barriers—parochial, political, and
disciplin ary—so that ideas could be exchanged in ways that hadn’t been done before. In the most modest and self-effacing way, he took great pleasure in the success of others, and took pride in creating enterprises that would allow people to realize their full potential. When he met someone his first question was, “What are you excited about?” Often he continued by asking what he could do to help achieve the other person’s goal. His keen interest and affection for young people did much to energize him right up to his final years.

Besides his professional interests, Glaser had a lifelong passion for the commercial airline industry. Over the years, said his daughter, Sally Glaser, Ph.D., “He and one of my brothers would often sit out in the back yard, listening to air traffic control communications as they looked at the approaching aircraft through binoculars.” He was an avid traveler, logging more than five million miles in air travel for both professional and pleasure trips, including a last one to Harvard in 2010 to attend his seventieth college reunion.


Elected 2000; Committee on Development 2003–10

Paul Berg

Robert W. and Vivian K. Cahill Professor Emeritus
in Cancer Research and Biochemistry
Director Emeritus
Beckman Center
Stanford University Medical School