

# Quality Qorner

## Tribute to a Mentor

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What started as a brief telephone conversation profoundly changed the track of my professional career. The very opportunity to share my thoughts, feelings, and approaches about laboratory quality with you in this column and in my workshops, articles, and audioconferences began with that event. I owe it to the man who started me on the quality-management path to tell you about how it all came to be. You see, he's gone now—taken from us forever in a tragic accident—my mentor and friend, David Nevalainen.

I was perplexed and intrigued that day in 1992 when Dave called to ask if I could spare an hour for him to explain how his project at the newly formed Abbott Quality Institute (AQI) and my recent work on developing performance standards for laboratory personnel could be combined to help blood collection centers and transfusion services grapple with the problems and complexities of testing donated blood for infectious diseases such as hepatitis B and C and HIV. He had started the AQI for Abbott and was preparing educational materials for their blood bank customers about controlling laboratory processes, one input of which is personnel. That meeting was a major “Aha!” moment for me because he had reduced to a set of understandable pictures and notes the vital concept of “Total Process Control,” borrowed from manufacturing to apply to the health care industry.

Soon after our meeting, he arranged for me to become a member of a newly formed NCCLS (now the CLSI) subcommittee on laboratory training verification. Abbott Laboratories was an industry supporter of NCCLS; for many years, Dave was an avid and active participant on many committees and served on its board of directors. Dave was instrumental in encouraging NCCLS board members to see the value of applying the initially AABB-defined Quality System Essentials (QSEs) to the scope of the entire clinical laboratory. My introductory experience with NCCLS encouraged me to continue to volunteer as an advisor, member, or chairholder on NCCLS/CLSI's many quality management guidelines, with some documents now in their second and third editions.

Through the AQI, Dave brought educational materials and workshops to blood centers all over the world. He involved me in a special project to prove the point that implementing a quality management system could provide blood centers in both resource-abundant and resource-limited countries with the means to successfully achieve certification or accreditation. I was sent to Thailand to teach their Red Cross Blood Program staff a quality management course we had designed that helped them to achieve ISO 9001 certification within two years. I taught the same course for the Honduras Red Cross Blood Program to help them achieve AABB international accreditation despite the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch. Dave helped the first two U.S. blood centers and a major noncommercial laboratory system achieve their respective ISO 9001 certifications.

When my hospital's laboratory faced some major reorganizational changes, I had to decide if I could live with the manage-

ment slot that I was earmarked for—one not at all to my liking or choice of career path. I had made a wisecrack comment to Dave that if the AQI would pay my mortgage I would take on all the extracurricular projects we had brainstormed. He leaped on my offer; I left my laboratory office on a Friday afternoon, went into my home office the following Monday morning, and said, “What kind of career suicide have I just committed?” Then, as a self-proclaimed “quality systems consultant” I started to work on one of our projects. That was 13 years ago.

When the AABB introduced the Quality Program to its members, later followed by its QSE-based quality management system, Dave and I launched into writing about how to use the QSEs and teaching workshops for every laboratory professional organization that would accept our proposals. My thrill of seeing hundreds of hours of work culminate in a published book with my name on the cover was tempered by the fact that although my parents were proud, they didn't have a clue as to what I did for a living or what the book was about. However, that didn't stop them from keeping one of my only two copies to show our Italian relatives!

Dave also gave me the opportunity to help an in-house Abbott reference laboratory implement a quality management system so we could experience the practical application and receive feedback that would strengthen any future programs or services. This invaluable experience has served me well over the last decade.

Nine years ago, Dave and his wife chose to accept Abbott's early retirement opportunity and move to Door County, Wisconsin, to live in a log cabin of their design. I now had to make it as a solo consultant because the AQI was closed and Dave had other plans for his second life. He became a master gardener, a master blacksmith, and a broomsquire. He sang in the church choir and actively supported the Door County Land Trust. We exchanged holiday letters in which he always told me about his wonderful county life and I shared my latest exciting travel and quality adventures. He encouraged me to retire early and enjoy a different aspect of living. All things considered, the thought is most tempting.

Dave died earlier this year doing what he loved—working out in the forest on his land—in something that can be explained only as a freak accident. His loss affects more than just the laboratory professional community he so well served.

### *This Month's Quality Quote:*

“Live every act fully, as if it were your last.”  
—*Buddha*

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