Think of a small hill you are standing on that grows over time into a mountain. That metaphor describes the life of George L. Blackburn, who is a founder of the burgeoning field of Nutrition Medicine. Dr. Blackburn died in Boston on February 20th, at the age of 81, after a long battle with melanoma.

Nutrition Medicine, as we know it today, had its roots around the time Dr. Blackburn began his surgical residency in 1965 at Boston City Hospital’s Harvard Fifth Surgical Service. Hospitalized patients who could not adequately nourish themselves with ad libitum ingestion of solid foods during that period of Dr. Blackburn’s training were fed with large-bore uncomfortable nasogastric tubes or with nutritionally incomplete isosmolar intravenous fluids. Loss of body cell mass often ensued with resulting functional impairments accompanied by high morbidity and mortality rates.

A critical life-changing event for Dr. Blackburn occurred in 1968: proof-of-concept studies conducted at the University of Pennsylvania demonstrated that intravenous infusion of a hyperosmolar nutritionally-complete solution into a high-flow central vein could support positive nitrogen balance and growth, first in animal models, and then in humans. This transformative discovery, referred to hyperalimentation or more recently as total parenteral nutrition (TPN), set the course for Dr. Blackburn’s research in 1970 when he began graduate studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Department of Food Science.

With his fellow graduate student, Dr. Bruce Bistrian, the two conducted early seminal studies of intravenous feeding solutions and first made the world aware of the high prevalence of protein-calorie malnutrition in hospitalized surgical (1974)(1) and later in medical (1976)(2) patients. The wave of research and clinical practice set off by the introduction of TPN and these publications culminated with the founding of the American Society of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (ASPEN) in 1976 with Dr. Blackburn elected in 1978 as president of the organization. I, among many others, traveled to Boston every year during that period to learn the latest developments in this rapidly growing field at the “Nutrition Support in the Care of the Critically Ill Patient” course organized by Dr. Blackburn and his Harvard colleagues.

Today we are well aware of the global “obesity” epidemic whose origins are often traced back in time to the nineteen seventies. As with TPN, Dr. Blackburn recognized the rapidly increasing prevalence of obesity, including severe or morbid obesity. He experimented with early clinical treatments, including the protein-sparing modified fast, and in 1973 he was the first surgeon in New England to perform a Roux-en-Y gastric bypass as an alternative to earlier high-morbidity operations.

During the nineteen eighties, Dr. Blackburn and other pioneers in obesity medicine coalesced around common clinical and research interests by forming the North
American Society for the Study of Obesity (NAASO) that later became The Obesity Society. As a perpetual leader, Dr. Blackburn was elected president of NAASO in 1999. As with TPN, Dr. Blackburn and his Harvard colleagues created the internationally-attending “Practical Approaches to the Treatment of Obesity” course, now in its third decade and named in his honor.

Among his many journal contributions, Dr. Blackburn was one of the original Nutrition board members and he served as Nutrition founder Michael Meguid’s primary mentor at Harvard.

Dr. Blackburn, at the time of his death held a number of academic positions, notably as the S. Daniel Abraham Chair of Nutrition Medicine, Professor of Surgery, and Associate Director of the Division of Nutrition at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Blackburn leaves behind his wife of 31 years, Dr. Susan Kelly and his four children, ten grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

Dr. Blackburn leaves behind a remarkable legacy of achievements that have improved the lives of scores of patients and stimulated the growth of a global interest among physicians in the rapidly growing field of nutrition medicine.

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