Melvin Greer died physically on May 19, 2010; however, his accomplishments and his legacy are eternal. Mel was born in New York City in 1929. After attending public schools in Brooklyn, New York, he studied at New York University, where he received a BA degree in 1950 (majoring in English and graduating magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa) and his MD degree in 1954 (Alpha Omega Alpha). After medical school graduation, he trained in pediatrics at the Bellevue Hospital (associated with New York University) and then entered the US Navy, where he was a pediatrician at the US Naval Hospital in Guam (1956-1958). He returned to New York for a 3-year fellowship-residency in adult and pediatric neurology at the Columbia–New York Neurological Institute under the direction of H. Houston Merritt and Sidney Carter (one of the founders of the subspecialty of child neurology in the United States). He completed his training in 1961 and joined the Pediatrics and Neurology faculty at the University of Florida College of Medicine and remained on the faculty until his death.

During his career at the University of Florida College of Medicine, Mel had 4 roles: leader, clinician, teacher, and investigator. He was chair of the division and then chairman of the Department of Neurology for 36 years. The head of a tribe, or the chief, protects, educates, supports, and enhances the careers and lives of the members of his tribe. Faculty members of the Department of Neurology often called Mel the “Chief” because he performed all these functions to the utmost. However, his leadership also extended beyond our department. For example, he was the president of the American Academy of Neurology (1985-1987) and played a critical leadership role in many other organizations.

As a clinician, Mel cared for both children and adults with neurological diseases (as well as medical diseases). Whenever a patient was sick and needed him, Mel was there. He was a person of few words, but his kindness was always apparent, and he tried to make his patients comfortable. For example, if he saw a child who was anxious or sad, he would sing to him or her “Have You Seen the Muffin Man” and have the child join him in song. His knowledge of both child and adult neurology was encyclopedic, but his very special gift was insight. Often, members of his faculty would toil over a patient’s diagnosis. Then Mel would look at the patient and in a few seconds say, “Oh, I think this is a case of...” After then doing the appropriate tests, he would invariably prove to be correct.
Whereas in many programs, intimidation and fear are used to teach residents and students, Mel taught by invitation. He always encouraged and invited excellence. I do not think I ever heard him say a negative comment to a student or resident, and as demonstrated from the time of the American psychologist B. F. Skinner, encouragement and reward are more successful than punishment and denigration. His excellence in teaching was recognized in 1970 when he was selected by the students for their Hippocratic Award. He also twice received the Award for Clinical Teaching.

In regard to research, Mel always recognized that nothing helps patients as much as research. He performed wonderful research and wrote many important papers. Some of his major interests were in normal pressure hydrocephalus and laboratory methods of diagnosing childhood neurological disorders.6-13

Airline and Mel had a wonderful marriage (58 years). They enjoyed friends, music, theater, films, food, and books. They raised 4 terrific children, daughter Alison (an educator) and 3 sons: Jonathan, Richard, and David (all are physicians). They also have 11 grandchildren. Before his heart failure, Mel was a strong man and a fantastic athlete. In the last few months of his life, his body withered, but he maintained his inner strength and dignity as he continued to see patients and to teach until his heart completely gave out.

Selected Bibliography of Melvin Greer
References