

Remembering a mentor: Jay Iams



Vincenzo Berghella, MD

Coming down from the podium, still elated by the honor of my first oral presentation at the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine (SMFM) meeting, a tall man approached me with a warm smile and his hand extended. “I’m Jay Iams, I loved your study” he said. He then went on to praise genuinely at length the retrospective comparison of cerclage vs no cerclage for patients with a short cervix on ultrasound, which included only 44 patients in total and was one of the first such assessments. After a few comments regarding the data, with us now standing in the back of the huge ballroom, he continued, “I am one of the editors at the American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology (AJOG). We would love to receive the full manuscript.”

In those few exchanges, my world changed for the better in so many ways. Jay Iams had become my mentor, friend, supporter, and guide. In that moment, and in the many interactions we had since then, he taught me so much, just by my watching what he was doing.

First, Jay’s positive reinforcement gave me the wings to fly and to continue my quest to find out if and when cerclage could be beneficial.

Second, Jay’s interest in the topic validated what I was doing. Soon after my presentation, he published the famous 1996 New England Journal of Medicine paper on cervical length,¹ which began to establish this screening test as valid in its predictions.

Third, Jay made me understand how wonderful it is to have smart colleagues working on the same clinical question that you are working on. Still now, I hear trainees distraught that someone else ‘has published my idea.’ You actually want as many people as possible to work on the question that you are trying to answer: they will cite your studies, they will give you ideas, they will provide opportunities for collaboration, and they will help you get to the answer more quickly!

Fourth, Jay taught me about collaboration. He later invited me to coauthor several papers.² Our discussions at meetings shaped my research ideas. He supported every promotion of

mine with letters of recommendation, even if we never worked in the same institution. I have since tried to emulate him by collaborating with eager researchers and supporting their careers by every means I can.

Fifth, Jay modeled humbleness and pure academic interest for me. He showed me, through the choices in his own career, that becoming Chair or Dean and doing mostly administrative work is not necessarily what all of us should aim for.³ He cared most about collaborative research (especially through the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Maternal-Fetal Medicine Unit Network), publishing the best studies he reviewed as Editor at AJOG, learning constantly, including by attending the SMFM Annual Meeting, and leading the specialty, including by being President of SMFM in 2003.

Sixth, Jay was a family man. He had 5 kids and over 10 grandkids, and every time he spoke about his family in Columbus, his face would light up. This famous obstetrician, clearly hard-working and dedicated professionally, cared mostly about his family and retired at the peak of his career to enjoy his personal relationships for years.

AJOG has in the past wonderfully celebrated Jay’s academic career.⁴ I am sure, like me, many others would celebrate his personal side, his smile, his support, and his mentorship. Thanks Jay. You were the wing who made me fly. The star I followed. What a wonderful life (like in the movie with this title, one of my favorites) you deservedly had. ■

ORCID iD authorship contribution statement

Vincenzo Berghella: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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From the Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Sidney Kimmel Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA.

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Corresponding author: vincenzo.berghella@jefferson.edu

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