



Joseph A. Vita, MD, 1956–2014

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In Memoriam

OPEN

Joseph A. Vita, MD, 1956–2014

John F. Keaney, Jr, MD and Joseph Loscalzo, MD, PhD

On November 2, 2014, our friend and colleague, Joseph Vita, died after a short but gallant struggle with lung cancer at the age of 58. Joe was never a smoker and typically appeared 10 years younger than his age; thus, it was particularly shocking to many when he became ill so suddenly and in his prime. He will be sorely missed; his contributions to cardiovascular medicine were many and diverse. He was a brilliant investigator, a superb clinician, an outstanding mentor, and an expert journal editor.

Joseph Vita was born in Fort Rucker, AL, on March 8, 1956. He received his undergraduate education at Yale University, graduating *summa cum laude* with a major in chemistry. A true Renaissance man, Joe was recruited by Yale to play football, but, instead, used his “spare” time to enroll in philosophy classes and to sing bass for Yale’s storied a capella group, the Whiffenpoofs. He attended medical school at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he also remained to complete internal medicine training at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, eventually serving as chief medical resident. In 1986, Joe left Columbia for Brigham and Women’s Hospital to complete his cardiology fellowship and to train as an interventional cardiologist.

It was during this time that Joe developed his love for research and put his interventional skills to work performing some of the first intracoronary endothelial function studies with Andrew Selwyn and Peter Ganz. He rapidly developed a reputation as a careful and driven translational investigator in vascular biology. Among his early achievements was a 1990 *Circulation* article, now cited 965 times, that established endothelial dysfunction in humans as the result of the cumulative impact of cardiovascular risk factors. He was instrumental in establishing our current understanding that endothelial dysfunction is a very early preclinical phenotype in human atherosclerosis.

On completing his cardiology training, Joe joined the faculty at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and served as director of the cardiac catheterization laboratory at the affiliated Veterans Affairs Medical Center in West Roxbury, MA. He proved to be an adept administrator, modernizing the facilities and establishing the West Roxbury VA Hospital as a regional interventional cardiology referral center.

Joe was recruited to Boston University in 1994 to establish a translational vascular biology research program. He was exceptionally versatile in performing clinical studies, and he quickly established a comprehensive program that

featured protocols for the assessment of vascular function by intracoronary infusion, venous occlusion plethysmography, and ultrasound assessment of flow-mediated dilation in the lower and upper extremities. His efforts yielded important new insights that taught us how oxidative stress influenced endothelial function and vascular homeostasis in humans. He was also fearless in tackling important questions, including a multiyear effort to establish endothelial function testing in the entire Framingham Heart Study with his colleague Emelia Benjamin. Overall, Joe wrote more than 200 peer-reviewed publications in his career, many shared with both of us over the years. As an investigator, Joe was exceedingly careful, critical, and objective in his evaluation of his own results, often to the point of being

his own worst critic. He developed a worldwide reputation in clinical investigation and, as a consequence, had many invited lectureships. His opinion was actively sought for the working groups that established international standards for endothelial function assays in patients. His scientific contributions earned him election to the American Society of Clinical Investigation and the Association of University Cardiologists.



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In 2004, *Circulation's* editorial offices moved to Boston University, and Dr Vita was appointed its deputy editor. In this capacity, Joe helped shape the portfolio of articles appearing in the journal, editorial policies, and the overall vision of the journal. He was an impeccable writer who enjoyed composing and editing manuscripts. Additionally and importantly, he maintained the highest scientific and ethical standards, frequently giving sound and thoughtful advice for managing the most challenging situations. For all of these reasons, Joe was invaluable as a senior editor.

In November 2011, the American Heart Association, responding to contemporary trends toward electronic publishing, launched its open-access journal, the *Journal of the American Heart Association (JAHA)*, with Joe as its inaugural editor-in-chief. Starting a journal from scratch is no small task; however, Joe was able to forge collaborations deftly with the other American Heart Association journal editors to facilitate manuscript referrals to *JAHA* and thereby rapidly increase the number of articles published with each issue. He was also able to garner submissions from a broad range of cardiovascular disciplines, closely reflecting the collective interests of the 16 American Heart Association scientific councils. By all accounts, *JAHA* has been a terrific success, and Joe's contribution has established its influence as an important part of the American Heart Association publishing portfolio for years to come.

Perhaps Joe's most enduring legacy will be his record of mentorship throughout his career. As one of his first trainees, Dr Keaney can attest that Joe was very generous with his

time and had a knack for moving projects along. He was ever patient, supportive, and encouraging, but demanding and particular in his writing. As a mentor, he was also careful to give his trainees projects that would help them become independent investigators in their own right. Given such great qualities, it is not surprising that he was also a popular choice as a mentor. Over his shortened career, he had no fewer than 51 trainees, with the vast majority moving on to academic positions or advanced fellowship training. In recognition of his outstanding record as a mentor, he received the inaugural Robert Dawson Evans Research Mentoring Award at Boston Medical Center.

We were both privileged to call Joe Vita our close personal friend. We knew Joe to be an affable, although reserved, person who was relatively private away from work. He was dedicated and generous to his close circle of friends and utterly dependable. He was an avid fan of history and loved to frequent museums on his travels. He loved classical music; the steady waft of Mozart from his office often announced his presence. His favorite recreational activity was sailing, and Wednesday evenings in the summer would find him racing on Hingham Harbor in his 36-ft sailboat, the *Bella Vita*. Fall would turn Joe's attention to his favorite sports franchise, the New England Patriots. Most important to him, however, was spending time with his family in the modest spare time he allowed himself. Joe leaves behind his wife of 24 years, Gina Fantasia Vita, as well as a daughter and a son. We join his family in mourning the loss of such a great husband, father, and friend. We will all miss him greatly.