

Giving Light: Pharmacy alumnus a champion for those with unique medication needs ^[1]

February 21, 2014



A premature baby weighing less than 2 pounds faces daunting obstacles; perhaps the gravest hurdle is an underdeveloped respiratory system. But there is hope.

“There is a drug that can be used to allow the lungs to get a blood supply,” said Bob Light, B.S. Pharm ’78. “The problem is this ‘sildenafil,’ which is Viagra, is dosed at the 50 or 100 milligram level and your little guy only needs a 4 milligram dose.”

So what can be done? The pharmacist immediately goes to work to figure out a stable dose for the baby, as well as how to administer the drug. “We can rub it on his skin, we can spray it into his nose, we can put a drop into his mouth; we have all those different tools available to use to solve a medical problem,” Light said. “I’ve got to tell you, when you have one of these little preemies and you have got to get that drug into them so they can vascularize their lungs, and you do it, the reward is pretty great.”

Light is a pioneer in compounding – the process of creating a pharmaceutical product to fit the

unique needs of a patient. His methodology and business model have been adopted by Walgreens across the country and his experience and wisdom continue to enable the pharmaceutical sciences industry to meet or exceed federal and state regulations.

And although Light is a leader in the industry, if you'd asked him in the late 1960s where he'd be today, pharmacy wouldn't have been a blip on his radar. A Vietnam vet, Light enrolled at CU on the G.I. Bill, thinking he'd get a degree in business. A part-time job delivering medications for a local independent drug store changed his life.

"Pharmacy had never occurred to me. I was going to go to school and maybe get a degree in finance and go into banking . . . I didn't know what I was going to do," he said. Light took prerequisites and any business class he could in the first year at CU-Boulder. But his boss at the drug store, Frances Hatch, also a CU alumnus, had a better idea.

"He said, c'mon, I want to take you to lunch. He drives me to Boulder, we sat down and had lunch with Dean (Harold) Heim, who was the dean of the School of Pharmacy way back when," Light said. "I sat there for an hour and a half and had the dean of the School of Pharmacy work with a kid who was just back from overseas and had no idea what pharmacy was all about, much less any particular phase of it."

Light switched his major. "I have to tell you, I can't imagine being more excited about any profession or – even 40 years into it now – how I got so lucky to trip across the profession."

In 1980, only two years out of college, Light bought Yosemite Drug in the Denver area from his mentor, Hatch. "We specialized in technical pharmacy like compounding and bone density checks and that sort of thing," he said. Light and his wife ran the drugstore for 23 years, raised their five children and put them through college (two at CU).

In 2003, he was approached by Walgreens and asked if he'd consider selling. "I had no idea what my exit strategy was," he said. "I thought I might have some young graduate from the School of Pharmacy who would want to work and buy a store, but that never materialized. I agreed to it."

Walgreens was impressed with the work Light was doing with compounding and wanted to know if his techniques could be replicated throughout their chain.

"And that's when everything went crazy," he said. "I wrote a 60-page business plan on how a multi-store, or a chain store, can do something as technical as compounding. You have to control the formulations, you have to control the products, there are lots of regulatory issues . . . a lot of problems to solve."

Ten years later, 821 Walgreens stores are compounding at the highest professional level possible, he said.

"A lot of people don't understand, 'How can a chain compound?' It's like an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp," he said. "But it seemed to work out and our professionalism and ethics are above reproach. In fact, many state boards of pharmacy look to us for the proper documentation to ensure they are used correctly – the forms that we use, the control that we have."

Light and his wife now live in Chandler, Ariz., and he works with Walgreens in Tempe. His

mentor, Hatch, lives in Arizona as well. In addition to his five children, Light has 11 grandchildren and two great grandchildren. “None of my children went into pharmacy, so you can see the influence I had,” he quips. “Two of them are already retired and all five are very successful.”

Retirement, however, isn’t for Light. “When Walgreens said, ‘Can you write a business plan on how we could do this,’ geez, I was off and running. It was like a second career within pharmacy.”

He’s also taken an interest in veterinary science and pharmaceutical compounding. “We’ve developed some unique ways to get medication into our animals,” he said.

Light explained how administering drugs in animals, say, a cat, can be done through compounding and knowledge of basic feline behavior. “How many times have you had a cat sit in your lap and you rub their ears? If you make a topical out of, say, amitriptyline, an antidepressant, and rub it on the inside of their ears, they get full absorption of it, and the cat is happy with you for doing it.”

Light received the distinguished Coloradan award in 1999 from the School of Pharmacy (now the Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences on the CU Anschutz Medical Campus). He also received the Art Hassan Jr. Memorial Award from the Colorado Pharmacists Society in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the practice of pharmacy in the state of Colorado in 2001 and the Innovative Pharmacy Practice Award given by the DuPont Co. in 1997.

Solving complicated issues from formulations and regulations to 2-pound preemies and pups, Light continues to be precisely that – a light – for people with unique health needs and the families who love them.

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A premature baby weighing less than 2 pounds faces daunting obstacles. But thanks to CU School of Pharmacy alumnus Bob Light, there is hope.

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