



Victor Cohn Prize

CASW's Victor Cohn Prize for Excellence in Medical Reporting

Acceptance speech by Rick Weiss, *Washington Post*, October 24, 2005

I am very happy to receive this year's Victor Cohn award. Happy for the recognition by all of you, my science-writing peers and mentors, which means a lot to me, but especially happy because this award keeps the memory of Victor alive.

I'd like to read you a letter I received from Vic 11 years ago last week: Oct. 18, 1994.

"Dear Rick,
This is a fan letter.
I just read your latest story on gene therapy, and it's really good!
I haven't read such a masterpiece of clarity since some things I've written.
(signed)
Constant Reader,
Vic"

I've never received a fan letter quite like that, and that says a lot about why we are all here today.

Victor was on the brink of retirement from The Washington Post's Health section when I arrived there in the fall of 1993. I'd worked at several magazines at that point, but had never worked at a newspaper. When I got there, Victor stood out to me as the iconic, veteran newspaperman I'd seen in all those 1940s and '50s movies a wry, curmudgeonly and sometime garrulous guy -- but with a wholly unexpected Woody Allen twist. Half Ben Bradlee, half Zero Mostel, he was funny, moody and seemingly comfortable in the knowledge that, having achieved a modicum of legendariness over the years, he could now devote himself to becoming a finely tuned caricature of himself.

That he succeeded in this endeavor is apparent from the handful of conversations I recently had with colleagues who worked with Victor. What do you remember most about him? I asked. Virtually every one of them responded: "Enough of this chit-chat!"

That was Victor's famous way of cutting conversations short, whether they were water-cooler gossip sessions or telephone interviews with sources. If he were sitting down, he'd say it while slapping his hands on both knees. It was a very effective way of dispersing coworkers -- whom he had inevitably attracted to his desk in the first place. Victor, after all, had that mix of gregariousness and intense desire to be left alone that helps explain why so many of us find ourselves trying to perform the profoundly personal act of writing in ridiculously social settings like newsrooms.

In fact, large chunks of Vic's career were spent in his home office, away from the crowds, where his natural writing rhythm was revealed, according to Jeff Cohn, his son and a neighbor of mine. For those who aspire to Vic's success, here was his method:

"He'd sit there in his office, in his pajamas and bathrobe, and work for a minute or two," Jeff told me. "Then he'd go upstairs and put on water for a pot of tea. He'd go back down, then the pot would start to whistle. He'd go pour the tea. Work a little. Then pour another cup or heat the first one up. Eventually he'd get dressed."

And those were his productive days.

"My father," Jeff said, "was very adept at getting grants to do nothing, including a six-month sabbatical from The Post to clean out his closet, literally."

What always got him back to work was his love of writing and the pride he took in being in print, though he was quick to make fun of that pride. One time, when he broke his arm, his daughter Deborah told me, he told people he broke it while trying to pat himself on the back.

When Vic wasn't writing science stories, sipping tea or cleaning his closet, he was writing letters -- some to friends or colleagues but many of them to journals and other outlets for publication. "Half of my letters to the New England Journal were about flatulence," he once told Jeff, without elaborating. None is known to have been published.

Victor was not one to bow to the authority of scientists. He saw them as curiosities, worthy of our attention not for their particular brilliance but for the strange things they did.

"Scientists are to journalists what lab rats are to scientists," he used to say.

At a time when many of our ilk were content to trumpet scientists' proclamations about the latest miracle cure or pending disaster, Victor maintained a more skeptical perspective.

"There are two kinds of stories," he used to snort. "New Hope and No Hope."

Committed to finding the truth between those extremes, Victor more than anyone arranged the important wedding of statistics and science writing. And of course his book on that subject, *News & Numbers* written, by the way, during not one but two Harvard fellowships he managed to wangle -- remains a classic to this day.

That Victor managed to write that bible is especially remarkable given the dirty little secret I recently learned about Vic: He hated numbers.

"My dad was horrible at statistics and math," Jeff told me. "He had no sense of that stuff. My mother handled the checkbook, the financial accounts and the investments. After she died paying bills could be an all day process."

Thumbing through News & Numbers the other day, I came across Vic's list of most important questions to ask scientists, and was taken aback by the power of the first on his list one so simple that it tends to get forgotten.

The question is: "How do you know that?"

In this age when evidence the core commodity of science and of all rational thinking is so often discounted as having no greater standing than simple belief, I can't think of a more important question to be pressed these days, not only by science writers but by journalists of all bents.

A wonderful thing about Vic was that he applied the same "How do you know that?" standard to journalists.

Once Don Colburn, a wonderful Washington Post health reporter who now writes for the Portland Oregonian, was scheduled to give a talk to reporters about how best to get a complicated story right without oversimplifying, hyping or demonizing. How, that is, to not get a story wrong.

He asked Vic, who thought a moment and said: "Leave out what you don't know."

"Of course I laughed," Don recently told me. "The wise man being a wise guy, right? How glib. How clever. But those six words, like much of what Vic said, get more complicated the more you think about them and the more you live."

Here's my take: We hear editors complaining a lot these days that stories need to be shorter. What better way to accomplish that goal than by leaving out what we don't know to be true? (Of course, that'll never happen. For one thing, Goodbye political desk!)

But enough of this chit chat.

Vic died almost six years ago. But he is alive today in my heart and now, I hope, in yours.