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**UChicago**  
**Medicine**

Digestive  
Diseases  
Center

**DEPARTMENT OF MEDICINE**

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RE: Support for Proposed Legislation to Recognize Joseph B. Kirsner, MD, PhD with a Posthumous Congressional Gold Medal

To the Members of the U.S. House of Representatives:

Joseph B. Kirsner, MD, PhD devoted his life to medicine, science, teaching and patient care. He was the embodiment of the term “doctor” which comes from the Latin word *docēre*, meaning "to teach." Kirsner taught generations of medical students and young physicians the importance of combining competence with compassion when treating patients. Kirsner wasn't just any doctor. After coming to the University of Chicago in 1935, he established the first academic GI unit in the United States and transformed the field of gastroenterology from its origins to an evidence-based and scientifically informed specialty. Within gastroenterology, he pioneered the study and treatment of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). His contributions to medicine extend beyond his research, training of future generations, and patient care. He helped found the American Gastroenterological Association, the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, and the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases, among others. Dr. Kirsner was renowned internationally and took care of dignitaries and royalty but remained steadfast in his care as well of our local community.

He received numerous awards and honors throughout his long career including but not limited to: Laureate of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, the highest citizen honor of the state; American Gastroenterology Association's Friedenweld Medal and the Distinguished Educator Award in recognition of training generations of academic and practicing gastroenterologists; the Distinguished Service Award from National Foundation for Ileitis and Colitis; and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation, which *he was awarded twice*. The University of Chicago Alumni Association bestowed two of its highest honors on Dr. Kirsner, the 1979 Gold Key Award and the 1989 Alumni Award. Despite all the honors and accolades, Dr. Kirsner can be most remembered for unequalled and steadfast patient care, his service as a mentor to generations of physicians, and the establishment of a legacy of practical wisdom, personal integrity, and rigorous scientific inquiry.

Early in 1943, though he was listed as an essential teacher and would have been exempt from service, Dr. Kirsner volunteered for active military duty. He joined the U.S. Army as a physician. In August 1944, about 10 weeks after D-Day, his unit landed at Utah Beach, Normandy. They established bases at various hospitals in France and Belgium, one of which was hit by a German rocket, killing his physician partner, something he reflected on for the remainder of his very long life and career- thinking that because he was miraculously spared from that attack, he would double his efforts to serve humanity for the rest of his own life. Over the next six months in France, Kirsner cared equally for U.S. soldiers with severe battle wounds, the captured German officers, and was one of the early physicians to witness and care for the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, describing some of their starvation-induced complex nutritional issues. Soon after VE Day, he was transferred to the Pacific Theater, where he advised on the rehabilitation of more prisoners

of war, including a group of badly burned Dutch prisoners who were being held captive in Nagasaki in August 1945 when an atomic bomb obliterated much of the city. There he described some of the early effects of the previously unseen radiation burns and injuries. He was discharged in 1946 at the rank of major, with three battle stars.

Dr. Kirsner published more than 750 papers and 18 books, including the authoritative textbook for IBD. He trained more than 200 of the field's leading specialists and still practiced medicine until he was 95. Even after retirement, former patients continued to call him for advice. Kirsner did all of this while focusing most of his attention on taking care of patients. He had little tolerance for doctors who did not share this devotion.

At the age of 100, he delivered a lecture to the University of Chicago Department of Medicine titled "The History of Gastroenterology", a history that he not only lived, but had indeed created. He died at age 102 in 2012. His legacy has lived on through his mentees and the ripple effect to those of us (myself among them) who teach the next generation of physicians and scientists about his essentials of devoted, principled, and always patient-centered care for the suffering.

It gives me great pleasure to endorse the legislation seeking to recognize the late Dr. Joseph B. Kirsner with the Congressional Gold Medal. The award would honor his legacy and endorse the principles by which he lived his life and which we wish to acknowledge and perpetuate for the care of the suffering.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Rubin".

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