

Bernard Lown, doctor at the vanguard of cardiac care, antiwar activist who shared Nobel Peace Prize, dies at 99

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 16, 2021, 1:06 p.m.



Dr. Lown was called "the Albert Schweitzer of our times" by author Norman Cousins. JONATHAN WIGGS/BOSTON GLOBE

Bernard Lown, a Harvard cardiologist who invented the first reliable heart defibrillator and later cofounded International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which won the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, died Tuesday at his home in the Newton part of Chestnut Hill. He was 99 and his health had declined due to congestive heart failure.

A professor of cardiology emeritus at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and senior physician (retired) at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Dr. Lown helmed

and senior physician (chief) at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Dr. Lown helped revolutionize cardiac treatment. He was one of the first physicians to emphasize the importance of diet and exercise in treating heart disease. He organized the first coronary care unit, at the Brigham, in 1964.

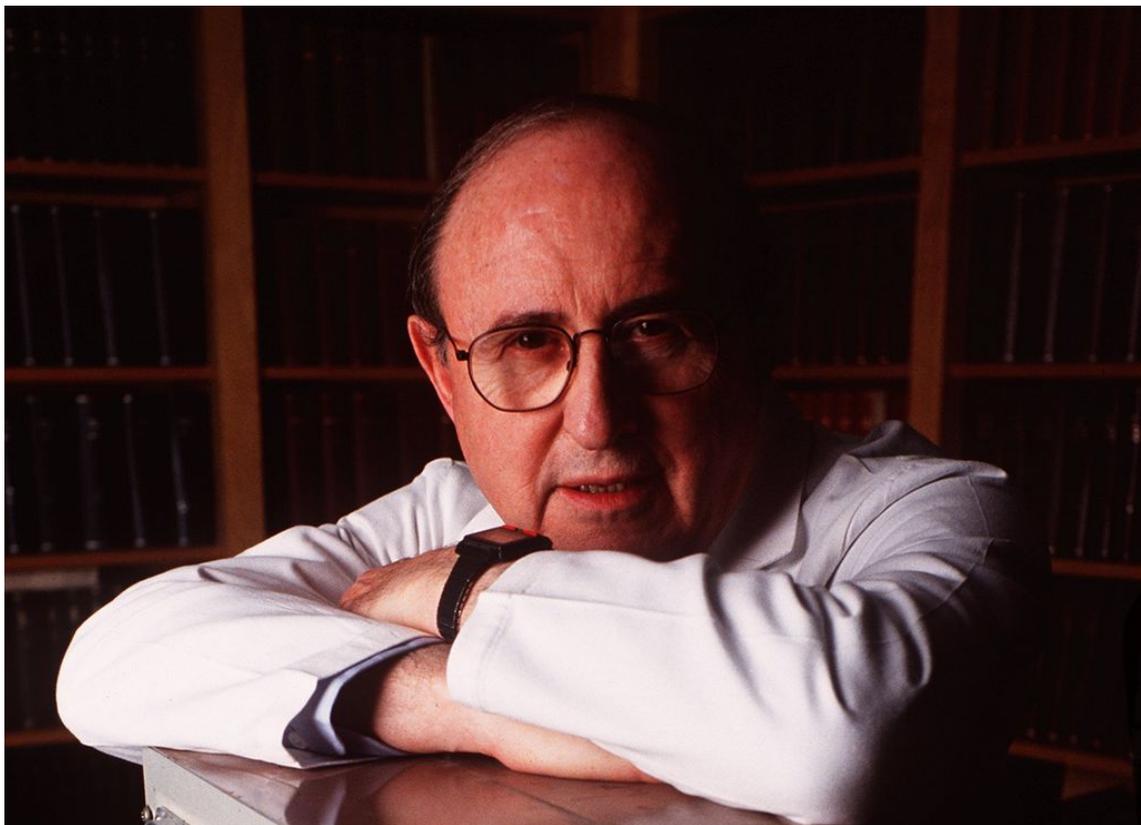
It was Dr. Lown who introduced the drug Lidocaine as a treatment for arrhythmia. And his invention of the direct-current defibrillator, also known as the cardioverter, in 1962 has saved countless lives. The device works by applying an electric shock to hearts that have stopped, causing them to resume beating.

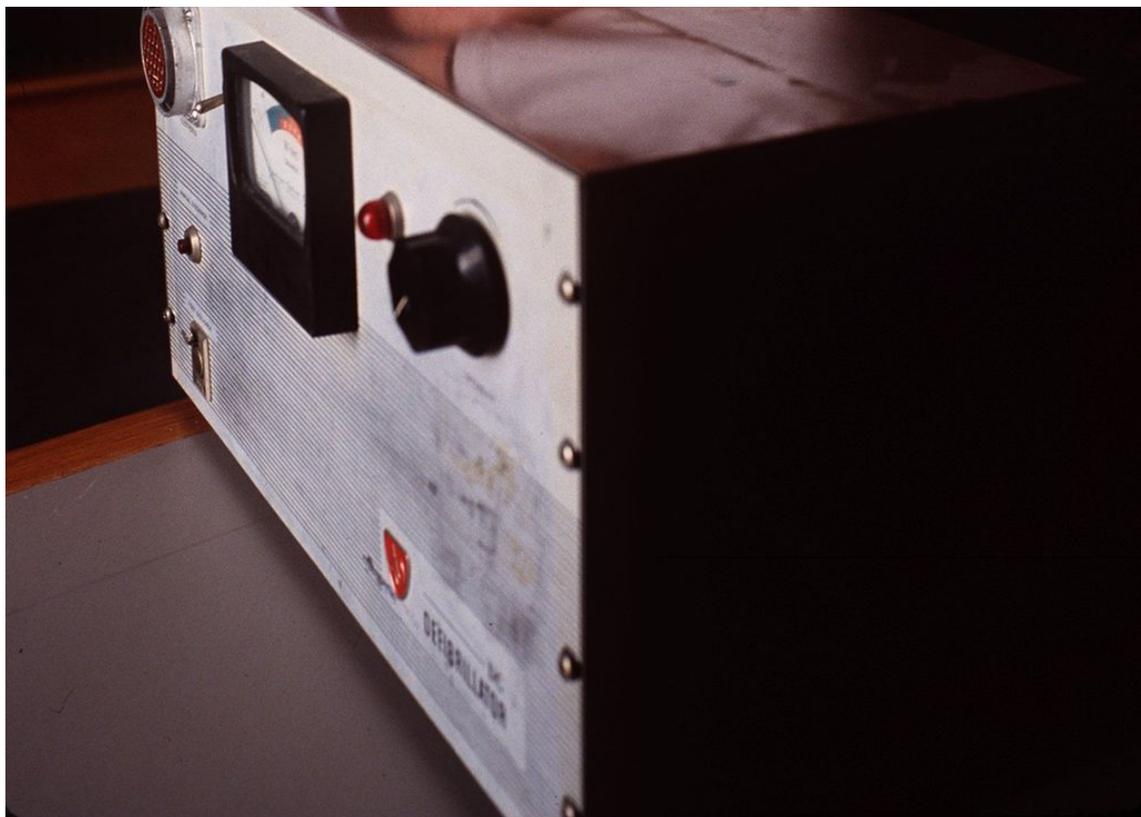
Asked in a 1999 Harvard Gazette interview to account for his legendary energy, Dr. Lown gave a one-word answer: "Anger."

He also told the Gazette that a "pillar" of his medical philosophy was "that one treats not a heart, but a human being who has a heart."

Dr. Lown's impact on the public realm was also considerable. The author Norman Cousins once called him "the Albert Schweitzer of our times."

In 1960, Dr. Lown helped found Physicians for Social Responsibility (the first meeting took place in his living room). He was a cofounder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War two decades later. At its height, the group had more than 200,000 members, with chapters in more than 60 countries.





Dr. Lown introduced the drug Lidocaine as a treatment for heart arrhythmia and invented the direct-current defibrillator. GLOBE STAFF LANE TURNER/THE BOSTON GLOBE

“To me, you cannot be committed to health without being engaged in social struggle for health,” Dr. Lown said in a 2001 Globe interview. He noted that many medical colleagues posit “an artificial divide, as though politics is dirty and medicine is clean. There is no such divide.”

The International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War was founded to advocate a no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons, a freeze on the building of further nuclear weapons, and a moratorium on all testing of nuclear weapons. The organization’s Nobel citation lauded it for “a considerable service to mankind by spreading authoritative information and by creating an awareness of the catastrophic consequences of atomic warfare.”

The physician-author Sherwin B. Nuland once described Dr. Lown as “an extraordinarily gifted physician, imbued with the humanitas, sensitivity, and keen powers of observation and synthesis that are hallmarks of medicine’s finest practitioners. . . . It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to identify a single living researcher who has done more to advance the scientific aspects of the art of healing, or who better exemplifies the conscience of the profession.”

Yet Nuland also noted Dr. Lown’s “air of self-righteousness . . . an overweening certainty of Solomonic clinical wisdom and an unbecoming tendency to compare

his transcendent skills with those of less gifted colleagues, always to their disadvantage.”

Bernard Lown was born on June 7, 1921, in Utena, Lithuania, the son of Nisson Lown, a rabbi, and Bella (Grossbard) Lown. He moved with his father to Lewiston, Maine, in 1935. Dr. Lown’s mother later joined the family. In 2008, the bridge spanning the Androscoggin River between Lewiston and Auburn, Maine, was renamed the Bernard Lown Peace Bridge.



Dr. Lown, crossing the bridge across the Androscoggin River between Lewiston and Auburn, Maine. It was renamed the Bernard Lown Peace Bridge in 2008. JOSE LEIVA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

As a high school student, Mr. Lown discovered the writings of Sigmund Freud and resolved to become a psychiatrist. He switched to cardiology soon after entering medical school but retained his “fascination with the mind-brain relationship,” as he wrote in his 1996 book, “The Lost Art of Healing.”

Dr. Lown graduated summa cum laude from the University of Maine in 1942 and received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1945.

Even as a medical student, Dr. Lown combined social awareness with medicine. Blood supplies at Johns Hopkins were segregated by race, yet he made a point of using blood from black donors for white patients. He was briefly expelled for doing

so.

In 1947, he married Louise Charlotte Lown, a social worker. She died in 2019.

Dr. Lown was drafted during the Korean War to serve as a doctor. Refusing to sign a declaration that he had never joined a “subversive” organization, he was dishonorably discharged, drafted again, and put to doing janitorial work at a military hospital.

“It ruined my life for a year and slowed down my career for a decade,” Dr. Lown told Gale Warner and Michael Shuman in their 1987 book, “Citizen Diplomats,” “but it made me a better doctor. . . . Suddenly I was bounced out of medicine and I didn’t know what was going to happen. It made me say, what are the issues? What does being alive mean? It was rich and complex and painful.”

Such issues were central to Dr. Lown’s clinical philosophy. First at the Brigham, and later at his Brookline clinic, the Lown Cardiovascular Center, he advocated what would come to be called a holistic approach, treating a patient rather than a patient’s symptoms.

“The way you shake their hand is very important,” Dr. Lown told National Public Radio in 1996 about his approach to patients. “Some people will merely touch fingers and rapidly remove them. Some people will give you a tight grip. You’re building up, slowly, almost archeologically, a human being: who they are, what they are, what is troubling them.”

In his 2001 Globe interview, Dr. Lown called high-tech, high-profit medicine “a dereliction of conscience.” It was no small irony that the revolution Dr. Lown helped bring about in cardiac care depended in large part on technology and emphasized surgery (Dr. Lown was a strong believer in trying to avoid invasive procedures). “A paradox of my life and its ultimate irony,” he wrote in “The Lost Art of Healing,” “is that my research work facilitated that which I utterly deplore.”

During the 1980s, Dr. Lown became an increasingly prominent figure among diplomats as well as doctors. His work with International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which he founded with Herbert L. Abrams, Eric Chivian, and James E. Muller of Harvard Medical School and three Soviet physicians, made him a hero to some as a model peace activist. In the eyes of others he was a dune, an analogist for the Soviet Union

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Detractors noted that Yevgeny Chazov, the international group's co-president, belonged to the Soviet hierarchy, as a deputy member of the Supreme Soviet and a full member of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Richard Perle, an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, called the group's membership "hopelessly naive. They are undoubtedly fine physicians, but, on strategic topics, they are neither even-handed nor well-informed."

Dr. Lown dismissed such criticisms. "We physicians have focused on the nuclear threat as the singular issue of our era," he said in accepting the Nobel. "We are not indifferent to other human rights and hard-won civil liberties. But first we must be able to bequeath to our children the most fundamental of all rights, which preconditions all others: the right to survival."

During a Stockholm press conference at the time of the award ceremony, Dr. Lown and other international group members, both American and Russian, helped resuscitate a Soviet journalist who had suffered a heart attack. Dr. Lown saw the intervention as a symbol for his organization's work. "It is the same with nuclear war. You treat it first and ask questions afterwards."

Dr. Lown leaves a son, Fredric, of Brookline; two daughters, Anne of Manhattan, N.Y., and Naomi of Arlington; five grandchildren; and a great-grandchild.

The family will hold a private burial and will announce a public memorial service after pandemic-related limitations on the size of gatherings are lifted.

In 1989, Dr. Lown founded SatelLife, which uses computer and satellite technology to improve health care in developing countries. In 1997, he founded ProCor, which uses the Internet to connect physicians and health workers in developing countries with information about cardiovascular disease.

Dr. Lown served as chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend Health Care, which backed a 2000 ballot initiative calling for universal health care in Massachusetts.

In 2012, he helped found the Lown Institute. The Brookline organization describes its mission as "to catalyze a grass-roots movement for transforming health care systems and improving the health of communities."

“Dr. Lown embodied a rare combination of technical skill, scientific acumen, and profound humanism,” said Dr. Vikas Saini, president of the Lown Institute, in a statement. “His commanding yet deeply comforting presence allowed him to connect with his patients in a way that was truly dazzling to generations of young doctors in training at Harvard.”

Despite his high profile as a political activist, Dr. Lown saw himself as a physician first. “There’s no drama that can compare with the drama of watching patients and participating in their lives,” he said in “Citizen Diplomats.” “If there were any justice, the doctor would pay the patient for the privilege of participating in this drama.”

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