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A Tribute to C. Leslie Mitchell, MD

David Mitchell, MD*

To recall the story of Dr. C. Leslie Mitchell at Henry Ford Hospital is to recount the history of orthopaedics at the institution. Les Mitchell came to Henry Ford Hospital in 1925, the year he graduated from the University of Toronto. He has maintained his association with the hospital ever since. His remembrances and recollections now extend further into the history of the hospital than those of any other living alumnus. He was born in 1901 in Victoria, British Columbia, an area for which he still has fond memories. He used to tell patients that he came from a place in Canada where flowers bloomed all year and one could play golf year round as well. His comments usually ended with a somewhat quizzical note, inviting the hearer to guess where such a place might be.

During his internship at Henry Ford Hospital, he spent a month’s rotation with Dr. Charles Peabody whose professional activity constituted the entire orthopaedic service at that time. Dr. Mitchell liked the field of orthopaedics so much that he took an additional and somewhat longer rotation with Dr. Peabody the following year. As no formal orthopaedic program existed, the service was considered a branch of General Surgery, which was headed by Dr. Roy McClure. At that time the practice of orthopaedics dealt primarily with bone and joint tuberculosis, Pott’s disease of the spine, other forms of osteomyelitis, and the residual disabilities resulting from infantile paralysis. Closed fractures were cared for by the General Surgery service, but open fractures were handled by Orthopaedics. (Open fractures characteristically became infected.) The orthopaedic patients were housed on the F-4 nursing unit where all the beds were fitted with Balkan frames. On reasonably bright days the patients with tuberculosis were moved in their beds either to the sun porch or to the F-4 roof for heliotherapy. At that time, probably no more than 200 orthopaedic operations were performed in one year. Most of the physicians’ time was spent in the plaster room, either making casts for direct care or plaster molds for fabricating braces.

In 1927 Dr. Mitchell moved to Portland, Oregon, to spend a year in a Shriner’s hospital for additional training in children’s orthopaedics. Upon his return to Detroit he was offered an orthopaedic position with Henry Ford Hospital. With him was another budding orthopaedist also destined to become distinguished in his field, Dr. William T. Green. It was not long after Dr. Mitchell returned to Henry Ford Hospital that Dr. Peabody left the institution for private practice. In 1929 Dr. Carl Badgely was recruited from the University Hospital in Ann Arbor to be head of the orthopaedic service and brought with him a large practice of children’s orthopaedics, the patients coming from all over the state of Michigan. While Dr. Badgely was at Henry Ford Hospital it was decided that the Division of

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Orthopaedics would provide care for all fractures. Dr. Badgely's stay was relatively short. He was offered a full professorship at the University of Michigan and returned there in that capacity in 1932. Dr. Mitchell was made head of the Division of Orthopaedics when he was only 31 years old.

When Orthopaedics became a separate department in 1957, Dr. Mitchell's title was changed to Chairman. He held that position until 1967 when he was appointed consultant to the department. In 1969 he retired from practice at Henry Ford Hospital and returned to the west coast from whence he came, although now he lived a good deal farther south. In La Jolla, California, where he now comfortably resides with his wife Rene, he once again finds himself in an almost ideal climate, swimming practically every day in the outdoor pool of their condominium complex.

During his active years as an orthopaedist, Dr. Mitchell watched and was a part of the flowering of the field of orthopaedics. Much change and great advances occurred during that time, in striking contrast to the earlier days of the "strap and buckle" doctors, as orthopaedists were once called. In his time, tuberculosis became a rarity and poliomyelitis with its residual crippling deformities virtually disappeared. Orthopaedic beds became filled with patients undergoing joint replacement and other, involved reconstructive musculoskeletal procedures. Along the way, Dr. Mitchell made many important contributions of his own and is probably most widely known for the popular bunionectomy procedure that bears his name. He held important positions in the orthopaedics field and received international renown. A member of many orthopaedic organizations, he held office in the most prestigious. He was elected to the American Orthopaedic Association in 1943 and was secretary of that organization from 1945 until 1954. He was president of the Clinical Orthopaedic Society in 1956, and became president of the American Orthopaedic Association in 1958. As a result of his efforts, the Michigan Orthopaedic Society was revived following World War II, and, as a tribute to him, the Henry Ford Hospital orthopaedic graduates named their alumni organization after him. Dr. Mitchell came from, and through, an era of giants in orthopaedics, achieving great stature in his own right during those same times. He was loved and admired by his patients, respected by his colleagues. Perhaps above all, and to his credit, I find him remembered most by patients and physicians alike as a man of dignity and honor and, at all times, a gentleman.