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Conrad Ramsey Lam, MD: Henry Ford Hospital's First Heart Surgeon

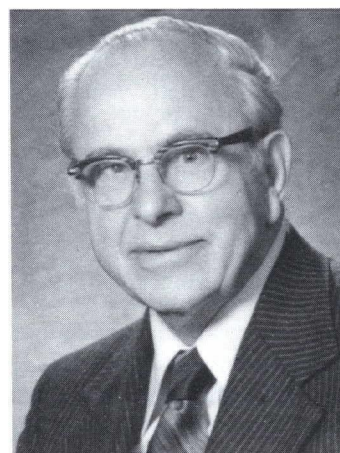
Donald J. Magilligan, MD*

In a book published in 1988 on cardiac valve allografts, the lead author, Sir Donald Ross of the National Heart Hospital, London, stated: "To set the record straight, the use of a homograft valve was first tried in the descending aorta of dogs in 1952 by Lam of Detroit" (1).

Today, 56 years after he came to Henry Ford Hospital as an intern, Conrad Ramsey Lam's innovative work in surgery is still bringing great credit to the city and institution where he worked. Other pioneering efforts of Dr. Lam at Henry Ford Hospital were: the first report of the use of purified heparin in the United States, the development of reversible cardioplegic arrest for the performance of open heart surgery, and the development of techniques for the closure of congenital intracardiac defects before open heart surgery was possible. Once the heart-lung machine was available, Dr. Lam performed Michigan's first open heart operation utilizing total cardiopulmonary bypass.

It would have been difficult to predict at the time he was born in Ogelsby, Texas, in 1905, that Dr. Lam would ever have the opportunity to achieve these major accomplishments and the ensuing international awards they earned. Conrad Lam grew up as the eldest of ten children in the dirt-poor scrublands of West Texas. From these humble beginnings he quickly showed he was a man on the move when he graduated from Tahoka High School as valedictorian—in a class of four seniors. He then earned magna cum laude honors at Simmons College (now Hardin-Simmons University) in Abilene, Texas. Dr. Lam's academic interests in college were continually challenged by a pressing need to earn money to finance his next semester's education. Finally he parlayed a \$15 cornet and a lifelong love of music into the organization of boys' bands in five small West Texas towns. Like Harold Hill, Dr. Lam's motivation was primarily to improve the minds of the young Texas lads, but since he also sold them the instruments, this first "Music Man" soon had enough money not only to finish college but begin his studies at Yale University Medical School.

After Yale, Dr. Lam earned the highly coveted internship at Henry Ford Hospital under Dr. Halstead's disciple, Dr. Roy D.



Conrad Ramsey Lam, MD

McClure. His enthusiasm, inexhaustible work habits, and surgical skill earned him a staff appointment after completing his Chief Residency in 1938. As the youngest member of the staff, Dr. Lam was given the onerous responsibility for the care of burns and thoracic problems. It took the vision of a man from the dust bowl plains of Texas to move Thoracic Surgery from a world of thoracoplasty and phrenic nerve crush to the high-tech world of open heart surgery. Like Halstead before him, Dr. McClure obviously had great talent for picking the right man for the job.

In 1941, Conrad Lam married Marian Smith who had ventured to Henry Ford Hospital from North Dakota as a dietetic

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intern. They have four children: Marjorie, who utilizes her PhD in Linguistics with the Pan American Health Organization in Washington, DC; Richard, who works for the Chevron Corporation in San Francisco; Janet, who resides with her family in Decatur, Georgia; and Douglas, the only one to follow his parents into medicine, who works as a physician in Family Medicine in Southern Pines, North Carolina.

In his career at Henry Ford Hospital, Dr. Lam was tireless both in the daily performance of clinical surgery and the relentless pursuit of new areas in the laboratory. For his efforts, he was honored in 1980 by Shiley Laboratories as one of the Ten Pioneers of Cardiac Surgery.

In 1983, Conrad Lam retired from Henry Ford Hospital after 51 years of service. He received letters of congratulations from President Ronald Reagan, Governor James Blanchard, Senators Carl Levin and Donald Riegle, and Mayor Coleman Young. In early 1984 a bronze plaque in the Cardiac Surgery Division was

dedicated to Dr. Lam for his accomplishments, with his longtime friend Dr. Denton Cooley as the honored speaker.

Among all the accolades which Dr. Lam received at the time of his retirement, the most appropriate was delivered by his colleague at Henry Ford Hospital, Dr. Emerick Szilagy. Throughout the '40s, '50s, and '60s, these two giants kept Henry Ford Hospital in the lead among Cardiac and Vascular Surgery Centers throughout the world, and as Dr. Szilagy stated of Conrad Lam: "For all those years he was the most potent agent in keeping the prestige of Henry Ford Hospital in the forefront of surgery."

Reference

1. Ross DN. Evolution of the biologic concept in cardiac surgery: A pilgrim's progress. In: Yankah AC, Hetzer R, Miller DC, Ross DN, Somerville J, Yacoub MH, eds. Cardiac valve allografts 1962-1987: Current concepts on the use of aortic and pulmonary allografts for heart substitutes. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988:1-11.