Robert S. Knighton, MD

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In the 75-year history of Henry Ford Hospital, only a limited number of physicians have devoted their whole professional careers to the institution. Dr. Robert S. Knighton holds a prominent position among them. He was born on August 17, 1914, in Valejo, CA, and attended Pacific Union College in Angovian, CA. After receiving his MD in 1943 from Loma Linda University and serving his internship at Los Angeles County General Hospital, he embarked on postgraduate training in the emerging field of neurological surgery. His training was interrupted by World War II, and he served in the United States Army as the neurosurgeon for the 112th evacuation hospital. After completion of formal training in neurosurgery, he moved to the Montreal Neurological Institute as a National Research Council Fellow in neurophysiology. There he worked with Wilder Penfield and Herbert Jasper in studying thalamocortical systems.

In 1948 he began his distinguished career at Henry Ford Hospital when he joined Dr. Albert Crawford in the Section of Neurosurgery. He helped establish the training program in neurological surgery which maintains a prominent place among the training programs in the country. He became Head of the Section of Neurosurgery after Dr. Crawford's retirement.

Dr. Knighton's initial research interests centered around the thalamus and reticular formation. These studies led to his clinical involvement in pain control and in thalamotomy for movement disorders. In March 1957 he organized the Henry Ford Hospital International Symposium on Reticular Formation of the Brain (1) with the assistance of Herbert Jasper of the Montreal Neurological Institute. This symposium involved the world's leading authorities in the neurosciences. In 1964, Dr. Knighton organized a second Henry Ford Hospital international symposium entitled "Pain" (2) in which experts from around the world participated.

In 1970, the Section of Neurological Surgery was combined with the Division of Neurology to create the Department of Neurology and Neurological Surgery with Dr. Knighton as chairman. When the institution affiliated with the University of Michigan, he was made Clinical Professor of Surgery (Neurosurgery) in 1971. He held the appointment until his retirement in 1978, when the Knightons settled in Cherry Valley, CA.

Because of his attachment to Henry Ford Hospital, Dr. Knighton agreed to visit the hospital every few months at the request of Dr. James I. Ausman, the new chairman. For several more years, the staff and residents benefited from his teaching and technical surgical skills.

However, in addition to maintaining regular visits to Henry Ford Hospital, Dr. Knighton began participating in clinical and teaching activities at his alma mater, Loma Linda University School of Medicine. In 1981 he was appointed Professor and Chairman of the Department of Neurological Surgery at Loma Linda and held the position until 1987.

At Henry Ford Hospital, Dr. Knighton trained about 40 neurosurgeons from around the world. Among them were residents who came from Canada, Mexico, Peru, Belgium, Pakistan, India, and Japan, and many have returned to their homelands to establish their own training facilities.

In 1976, his former residents held the first Robert S. Knighton Alumni Association meeting at Henry Ford Hospital. Nearly all of his trainees attended, and they presented Mrs. Knighton with Dr. Knighton's portrait commissioned from Eve Szilagyi.

Dr. Knighton's great clinical and surgical skills were kept hidden under the shadow of his modesty. But those who worked with him readily recognized his skillful clinical assessments, his empathy for patients, and his attention to minute details in the operating room. The utmost respect for tissue, be it skin, bone, or the nervous system, was the hallmark of his teaching and practice. One colleague described him as "a man of consummate surgical skill and even greater practicality."

On the subject of interaction with colleagues and patients, he wrote to his residents on one occasion:

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"We all have our egos, our prejudices, our conscious and unconscious self-serving goals, and our own method of fulfilling these. I believe strongly that any of the above should not interfere with the rights and beliefs of other individuals particularly when we enter a service-oriented profession. We must sublimate our egos to the needs of the patient we are serving. I recognize that 5% to 10% of people are superior and a similar number fall at the other end of the spectrum, but 80% to 90% of us lie somewhere in between and must get along with one another."

Dr. Knighton participated in national and international neurological organizations. He was Vice President of The American Academy of Neurological Surgery (1977-1978), President of The Neurosurgical Society of America (1974-1975), and examiner for the American Board of Neurological Surgery. He was the honored guest at the Fifth Mexican Congress of Neurological Surgery in March 1977 where his keynote address was entitled "The Old and the New in Hypophysectomy." Throughout his superb professional career, he was involved in charities and served on project HOPE.

The Knightons recently celebrated their Golden Anniversary in the company of their five children and their families. I had the privilege of training under Dr. Knighton and the honor of working with him on the staff. There are no words to express my gratitude for his support and encouragement.

References