Walter Lawrence, Jr.: A Tribute to a Surgical Oncologist. “Been There, Done That”

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Besides my own father, I have looked up to perhaps four other role models and heroes whom I have tried to emulate. While most of them (Richard E. Wilson, David M. Hume, and my father) are no longer with us, one of them, Walter Lawrence, Jr., is still very much alive, and extremely active, as illustrated by this edition of Seminars in Surgical Oncology. He has tackled this task much the way he does everything—with energy, enthusiasm, determination and, most of all, joy. It has been his attitude as much as his accomplishments that have served me as a model. From my vantage point of knowing Walter (as he insists I call him) for more than 35 years, it is clear that his motivation to achieve has been not a desire to be recognized, but a desire to make a contribution. His seemingly easygoing manner belies an incredible level of energy and drive. He never hesitates to take on another task, a habit that is difficult to copy.

Born in Chicago in 1925, the son of a family doctor (today called a primary care physician), he attended Dartmouth College as a Navy V-12 student and graduated from the University of Chicago, from which he also received his MD degree. He did his residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital, followed by additional training at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. His training at Memorial was interrupted by a stint in the Army during the Korean conflict. He served there as Chief of Surgery at the 46th Army Surgical Hospital, and many of us have speculated that he was the model for the character “Hawkeye” depicted in the movie and television series “MASH” (Fig. 1). He has often pointed out to me that the key principal of military surgery, especially in a combat zone, was always to do things the same way—not a bad practice in civilian circumstances either. After completion of clinical and research training at Memorial, he remained at that center and was on the faculty at Cornell until 1966, including a period as a Visiting Investigator in England from 1964 to 1965 (Fig. 2). While at Memorial, he performed the first kidney transplants in New York City, which resulted from Memorial having the only dialysis unit in the city. He also did research on regional chemotherapy (now considered a new innovation) in the early 1960s. In 1966, after 2 years of “courtship,” Dr. Hume, who had come to Medical College of Virginia a few years before, recruited Dr. Lawrence to head a new Division of Surgical Oncology, the first such division in any academic medical center in the country. He created a uniquely favorable environment for the sub-specialty of surgical oncology, which matched his vision of what this specialty should be all about. Indeed, he helped to shape this vision for the world, and is widely recognized wherever I go as one of the key “Founding Fathers” of surgical oncology. When Dr. Hume was tragically killed in a plane crash in 1973 (when I was a medical student at MCV), Dr. Lawrence served as interim chairman of the Department, but he had more important work to do than running a surgery department. In 1974, he became director of our cancer center, and was the driving force behind developing the interest, institutional will and funding to get what is now the Massey Cancer Center started. Since the first grant to the center from the National Cancer Institute in 1975, it has been continuously funded up to the present. Dr. Lawrence stepped down from directorship of the Cancer Center in 1988, in order to have a new director in place in time for the next core grant renewal application.

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In honor of his contributions, a Walter Lawrence, Jr. Distinguished Professorship in Oncology was established, a position which I am now honored to hold.

Dr. Lawrence has served on almost every important national surgical and cancer-related panel, lead many national organizations and won numerous awards. To list just a few of the most notable ones, he has been Chairman of the American College of Surgeons’ Commission on Cancer, President of the national American Cancer Society, served on the Board of Surgical Advisors and multiple scientific review committees of the National Cancer Institute, been Chairman of the Surgical Oncology Research Development Subcommittee of the Board of DCT of the NCI, was a member of the National Cancer Advisory Board, and was President of the Society of Surgical Oncology and the Halsted Society. He has served on many Editorial Boards and as Associate Editor of CANCER (since 1962) and the Journal of Surgical Oncology (since 1978). Among the numerous awards he has received are the 1992 Virginia Cultural Laureate Award, President’s Medal of the American Cancer Society, Cancer Fighter of the Year Award (1999) from the Beckstrand Cancer Foundation, University Award for Excellence (1988) and Presidential Medallion (2000) from the Virginia Commonwealth University, and the Science Museum of Virginia Lifetime Achievement in Science Award. This list does not include winning awards in multiple years at Virginia Commonwealth University for outstanding teaching of medical students and residents (see Fig. 3). He has also served as advisor to multiple institutions and cancer centers around the world.

Dr. Lawrence joined with Dr. Bernard Fisher (another of my heroes) and other surgeons to form the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP). His early participation is reflected in our being NSABP Institution #007 for many years, until we became a minority-based CCOP. Dr. Lawrence’s bibliography includes more than 260 papers on a wide variety of topics, as well as half a dozen books, and 35 book chapters.

Well, those are the facts, but they do not really tell the important part of the story of Walter’s life and accomplishments. He has been almost everywhere, done just about everything, and seems to know almost everyone in American surgery, alive or dead. In almost any conversation about the history of surgery or any specific area or technique, he will let you know that the key individuals

Fig. 1. Dr. Lawrence and a colleague in Korea.

Fig. 2. Dr. Lawrence in the laboratory in England, 1964.
worked with him or for him at some point. Almost any new method that comes along in surgery, he has seen or done before, usually many years ago (like regional chemotherapy). He has seen it all go around and come around; truly a valuable perspective. Some of Walter’s most notable accomplishments and the things that we should all learn from are less well known and are not reflected in his curriculum vitae. For example, he may be the only person admitted to the membership of the Southern Surgical Society twice. He resigned from this group when they would not admit an African American candidate; he was later re-admitted to the Southern after that black candidate had achieved membership some years later. This is a typical example of his sense of what is right. That is just one area where he has been a valued source of advice over the years.

A few of the memorable things he says may give those who do not know him well a flavor for this remarkable man. Among my favorites are: “Nothing beats a failure like a try.” (Usually as part of advice on how to solve what seems to be an insoluble problem, and it took me nearly 20 years to figure out exactly what that meant.) Or “Don’t think too much—it weakens the team.” (This applies as much to the tennis court as to the operating room.) Or the way he likes to introduce me to people as “my boss.” He also points out that I must be brilliant, since, after all, I am the Walter Lawrence professor, notwithstanding my embarrassment. One I will never forget was a remark when a resident and I (then a fellow) figured out that we had twisted a bowel anastamosis and would have to, as Walter would put it, have a “do-over.” His comment when he looked over the ether screen was, “You guys must feel stupid; I’m not even scrubbed and I feel stupid.”

Walter loves to travel, see new places and have unique new experiences. Over his lifetime, he has literally climbed many mountains (including Mt. Rainier), seen many foreign lands and been to every continent. He and Susie will be going to Ghana for Christmas this year to visit one of his sons, who is an international aid expert. A partial listing of just their most recent trips gives one a feeling for their sense of adventure: a boat trip up the Amazon, a cruise to the Galapagos Islands, visiting his son in Indonesia and Borneo, or touring areas of China that were soon to be flooded by the great dam being constructed on the Yangtze River. He has certainly lived fully, and continues to do so, without fear or regrets.

Perhaps his most remarkable quality is his constant enthusiasm and excitement about learning something new or trying a new experience. His intellectual curiosity is powerful and persistent. Even now, he continues to check off articles to be copied from the journals that circulate in our office, attends almost every session of our Divisional journal club (and has read the papers). He is still excited about clinical trials, whether completed or about to be started. His joy in learning new skills has lead him recently to take up the accordion, which he played in childhood. He is taking frequent lessons and practices regularly. However, he did refuse to buy all 12 books in the teaching series, since he said he is unlikely to live long enough to get through them all (I doubt that); he did buy the first 6. The delight he shows playing a tune he has
just learned is the same as his delight in figuring out an obscure diagnosis, finishing an article, a perfectly placed passing shot at tennis (which he plays 2–3 times a week, on the court in his back yard), or meeting a bright young medical school applicant (he just recently stepped down as chairman of the admissions committee and still reviews applicant files and interviews applicants weekly). In fact, he has shown the same joy in putting together this issue and seeing it come out well. That is perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this man—to find joy in every accomplishment or task completed, new experience, or new fact learned.

He shows just as much excitement about the accomplishments of others he has helped to get where they are, whether former trainees, students, or his own children. Despite all he has done, his devotion and care for his wonderful wife Susie and his four children is truly remarkable. He is proud of all of them, in their remarkably varied lives and professions. Only one, the oldest, is a surgeon, but he is just as proud of the other three. He thinks nothing of driving hours to Kentucky to see a granddaughter in a play (he attended all three showings) or spending hours playing tennis with his grandchildren. The yearly gatherings of his clan for ski trips are a special treat for him (Fig. 4). Incidentally, he still skis well, and fast enough to have fractured a shoulder blade just a few years ago (after he had his hip replaced).

It has been a great pleasure to be close to this incredibly accomplished and energetic man for more than three decades, and it is an incredible honor to hold a position named for him. If each of us could accomplish only a fraction of what he has done, and been a friend and mentor to so many and be loved by our families half as well, we would have done much indeed. The only way to summarize his full and exemplary life would perhaps be to say that for anything I might imagine doing, professionally or personally, he could say “Been there, done that.”