



JAMES K. ALEXANDER, M.D.

December 25, 1920 – March 29, 2009

Dr. James K. Alexander was born December 25, 1920, in Evanston, Illinois, and died peacefully at his home in Houston, Texas, on March 29, 2009, at the exalted age of 88 years. To his friends and colleagues, he was addressed simply as “J.K.” He was educated at Amherst College with a degree in French and an eye initially on entering international law. He changed his mind in his senior year and decided on a medical career, subsequently taking all of his required pre-med science courses at Amherst. During this time, he became a champion squash player, excelled on the debate team, and learned to fly, thinking that if he were drafted, he would “be above the fighting.”

Upon graduating from Amherst in 1942, he worked for a year before entering Harvard Medical School, where he graduated in 1947. He then fulfilled a 2-year commitment to the U.S. Army. Specialty training in internal medicine and cardiovascular disease followed, in part under the aegis of Drs. André F. Cournand and Dickinson W. Richards, who were later to become Noble laureates for their work as pioneers in cardiac catheterization. The fact that his parents were both teachers likely played a major role in his becoming a renowned teacher of the art and science of medicine. His mind was ever searching for new information or for correction of inaccuracies. I remember much about J.K., particularly his probing questions delivered to trainees or colleagues and especially to invited guest lecturers. His debate skills frequently came to the fore during exchanges at lectures.

After his training in cardiology, he moved to Houston in 1954 to work at Baylor College of Medicine, where he became a professor of medicine and eventually served as chairman of the sections of cardiology at Baylor, the VA Hospital, and Ben Taub Hospital. His private patients were seen at The Methodist Hospital, where he, along with Drs. Don W. Chapman and Ray Skaggs, was the first to perform right-heart catheterizations.

He retired from Baylor in 2007 having earned many teaching and research awards as well as the deep respect of his peers and colleagues. Every cardiology trainee during his tenure became well acquainted with J.K. They were taught the importance of caring

for each patient while searching for cures — the former more often obtainable than the latter. His epitaph, describing the aim of every physician, is a quote from the Memorial Statue of Dr. E.L. Trudeau that resonated with every student he encountered: “Cure occasionally, relieve often, console always.”

J.K.’s scientific interests lay in the function and pathophysiology of the heart, which he studied first through cardiac catheterization techniques learned from Drs. Cournand and Richardson and later using echocardiography, both of which he pioneered in the Texas Medical Center. He became the epitome of the classic clinical cardiologist, encompassing the skills of the basic scientist with the bedside manner of the fine clinician. He wrote extensively about the effect of obesity on the cardiovascular system. Studying the cardiovascular effects of high altitude led him on numerous occasions to Leadville, Colorado. There he was able to satisfy both his scientific curiosity and his passion for the outdoor life of camping, hiking, and especially fly fishing, which he managed to pursue over several continents. He scaled Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania on several occasions. On his last trip at age 75, he was connected to a Holter Monitor recording his heart rate and rhythm as he climbed. At an undisclosed altitude, he correctly determined it was time to go back down, as he had developed significant cardiac arrhythmias later proving to be ventricular in origin. He enjoyed music, as do many physicians, and served on the board of Houston Friends of Music. It is likely no surprise to learn that he was also an Eagle Scout.

The four qualities that I believe reside in a great physician — honesty, integrity, humility, and a sense of humor — all lived comfortably under the skin of J.K. He was a role model for many physicians and a friend to everyone. His easy smile, humor, and encyclopedic knowledge of cardiovascular medicine and life in general are still recalled with a quiet smile. His legacy as one of the building blocks of the Texas Medical Center, Baylor College of Medicine, and the Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center is firmly in place and recognized by all.