Historical perspectives of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery: Dwight C. McGoon (1925-1999)

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After returning from a visit to Dr Brian Barrett-Boyes in Auckland, New Zealand, Dr John W. Kirklin (59th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery [AATS]) was performing the first aortic valve homograft operation in the United States at the Mayo Clinic in the mid-1960s. Torrential bleeding was discovered after initial attempts to discontinue cardiopulmonary bypass. Dr Kirklin ultimately invited Dr Dwight C. McGoon, then his junior faculty member, to join him in the operating room. After calmly greeting all the members of the operating room staff, Dr McGoon sincerely thanked Dr Kirklin for the privilege of scrubbing on this historic case. McGoon was a technical master, and with his deft “assistance” the bleeding was quickly controlled and the patient successfully separated from cardiopulmonary bypass. Before leaving the operating room, McGoon again thanked all those in attendance for their participation. Shortly after McGoon’s exit, Dr Kirklin, who was in rare amazement, remarked distinctly, “No one can be that nice *and* that good. I bet he kicks the dog when he gets home!”¹

FORMATIVE YEARS

Dwight C. McGoon, the 64th president of the AATS, was born on March 24, 1925, in Marengo, Iowa. He attended Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, and then St Ambrose College in Davenport. He received his medical degree from the Johns Hopkins University in 1948. On graduation, he interned at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and went on to train in surgery under Dr Alfred Blalock until 1954. Like many other surgeons from his generation, Dr McGoon served in the military, spending much of his stint in the US Air Force from 1954 to 1956 in the European theater.²

HE JOINS THE STAFF OF THE MAYO CLINIC “HIGHLY RECOMMENDED”

As the story goes, when Dr Alfred Blalock (30th AATS president) was chief of surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital,

he once confided his “unrealized ambition” to Dr O. T. Claggett (42nd AATS president), who, at the time, was the chief of the section of thoracic surgery at the Mayo Clinic. Dr Blalock told Dr Claggett that his “unrealized ambition” was to have one of his residents join the staff at Mayo Clinic, but that he had not yet trained the “right surgeon for the job.” Dr Claggett offered to consider the proposition once Dr Blalock believed he had found the “right young surgeon” who would fit the Mayo Clinic “philosophy.” Some years later, Dr Blalock realized that his ambition could be fulfilled while training young Dwight McGoon. He wrote to Dr Claggett and, shortly thereafter, arrangements were made for Dr McGoon to spend 1 year at Mayo Clinic as a surgical fellow as a prelude to any final commitments. It soon became apparent both to the Mayo Clinic staff and to Dr McGoon himself that Dr McGoon would be a welcome asset and excellent “fit” with the Rochester, Minn, group practice. As expected, the year went well and Dr McGoon joined the surgical staff at the Mayo Clinic on July 1, 1957.²

MAYO CLINIC YEARS

Dr McGoon made many contributions to the Mayo Clinic while simultaneously making important advancements in the field of cardiovascular surgery, including many clinical “firsts.” He was promoted to professor of surgery in 1973 and served as Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery* from 1977 to 1987. Although his operating room career was cut short in 1979 by the effects of Parkinson’s disease, McGoon continued to be involved in Mayo Clinic affairs until he formally retired in 1990. Of all his personal attributes, one of his finest was that he never considered the cruel development of his progressive neurodegenerative disease as a personal tragedy. Conversely, he simply altered the trajectory of his career to include more teaching, consultation, and writing in medical, philosophic, and spiritual domains, a trajectory that he continued productively until his death on January 27, 1999. Dr McGoon’s greatest contributions were derived from both his extraordinary abilities as a surgeon and his extraordinary kindness and humanism.

AATS PRESIDENT

Dr McGoon delivered his AATS presidential address at the annual meeting in New York City in 1984. The title of his address was “A Laboratory for Progress” and its thesis was that life and humanity’s trajectory is inexorably toward progress. To illustrate his point he drew from the

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history of the specialty—in both general thoracic and cardiovascular surgery. He emphasized how an increasingly imperative need is met by emergence of a new principle or technology through innovation. He cited how the breakthrough technologies of positive-pressure ventilation and extracorporeal circulation met the imperative needs of supporting respiration during intrathoracic surgery and supporting cardiopulmonary function during intracardiac surgery, respectively.

The real topic of his address, however, was progress for humanity as well as individual progression, a message that reflected his deepest beliefs that humankind's "intelligence prompts us to sense beauty, to reach upward, to learn, and to crave progress toward a better life." He called on the Association's members to shake themselves loose from the destructive influence of selfishness, to undergo an attitudinal change from greed and mistrust toward mutual concern and faith in each other. He suggested this change would bring the "dawning of a powerful pattern of human fulfillment and happiness." Finally, he asked surgeons for a rededication of themselves to the service of humanity and he directed surgeons' efforts (clinical, administrative, educational, and research) to come from a concern for the "welfare of needful human beings."³

LEGACY

Dr McGoon left a rich and enduring legacy for the field of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery (Figure 1). Clinically, he was a pioneer in advancing cardiovascular surgery and made numerous contributions to his patients, residents, and the surgical literature. As a humanist, he was described by one of his trainees as "the consummate gentle man and a true gentleman." By one of his contemporaries, he was described as one "committed to elevate his own thoughts to a higher spiritual level ... a man of refinement, of culture, of selfless dedication to things of eternal consequence ... always a gentleman, always humble, always considerate, he looked for ways to build up the people around him." (Russell M. Nelson, MD, PhD, written communication. March 2010.) His legacy of mentoring and kindness persists in the AATS. As an appropriate tribute, the AATS presents the Dr Dwight C. McGoon Award annually at its scientific session in his honor to a cardiothoracic surgeon who has demonstrated a remarkable interest in resident training—inside and outside of the operating room.

Dr McGoon is also reverently remembered for his prescient emphasis on attending to the individual patient's quality of life rather than solely focusing on the quantity of life. This was best evidenced in his 1985 presentation to the American College of Chest Physicians: "The medical profession will come to focus increasingly upon the health and happiness of the individual person, thus accepting a slight departure from its traditional unrelenting

FIGURE 1. *Top*, Watercolor of Dwight C. McGoon by Jane Destro. It remains prominently displayed outside the Mayo Clinic Cardiovascular and General Thoracic operating rooms. *Bottom*, Dwight C. McGoon's signature (from the Mayo Clinic archives).

efforts against any and all threats of death."⁴ Maybe most important, Dr McGoon's legacy endures for patients afflicted with and affected by Parkinson's disease. His book, *The Parkinson's Handbook: An Inspiring, Practical Guide for Patients and Their Families by a Mayo Clinic Surgeon With Parkinson's Disease*, is still available 20 years after its publication.⁵ Dr McGoon's legacy endures as one of concern and service directed toward "needful human beings." The field of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery and the AATS have had many remarkably talented leaders over their distinguished histories, leaders who

have possessed extraordinary mentoring and leadership skills in addition to superb clinical acumen, surgical skills, and prolific research accomplishments. Among them, Dwight C. McGoon stands apart as a man of distinct refinement and genuine kindness that touched, inspired, and lifted those around him.

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