

Moments in surgery

Many of our readers are the guardians of lore, amusing or illuminating, about our surgical heritage. This oral history will be lost unless it is captured now. The Editors invite you to submit anecdotes, vignettes, stories of your mentors (great and small), or simply the tall tales you tell your residents about the way it once was.

Thank you, Alec

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MY INITIAL EXPOSURE TO ALEC was as a fourth-year medical student on a general surgical rotation at Groote Schuur Hospital, University of Cape Town, South Africa, in the late '50s.

He lectured to this group of wide-eyed neophytes on diseases of the breast and of the endocrine system in a manner that was spellbinding. This unique spell was cast by a number of factors—distinct factors for which he was to become so well known worldwide during the ensuing 4 decades. These factors were, in essence, his tall and handsome figure, his lucid presentation filled with both wit and humanism, and his British accent laced with an American “twang.” To the male students, he soon became an enviable role model, while the female students’ hearts were sent aflutter. Soon he joined us on the weekends on the picturesque university cricket pitches and on Friday evenings for a beer or two at the watering hole known to all University of Cape Town graduates as the “Pig and Whistle,” where he regaled us with stories of his residency in surgery at a mystical place called the Mayo Clinic in the United States of America, a country which, to us ignoramuses, was synonymous with Hollywood.

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My personal relationship with Alec grew rapidly as professor and young medical student spent many unforgettable Sunday afternoons on a variety of Cape Town golf courses. How lucky I was.

My commitment to a career in surgery was decided long before I met Alec; however, where to obtain my postgraduate training was not. The choices for a surgical residency were, in my mind, one of the 5 training programs in South Africa—Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Johannesburg, Pretoria, or Durban. I thus made an appointment to see Alec and seek his counsel. He politely listened to my preamble before stating: “You belong at the Mayo Clinic. I will take care of it.” My entire life changed and the fantasy life (which continues to this very day) commenced when within a few months of this fateful day, and without any personal interviews, I received a telegram of acceptance from the Mayo Clinic general surgical training program in far off Minnesota. The rest, as they say, is indeed history.

Alexander J. Walt subsequently left Cape Town for the United States of America. His surgical career was outstanding, with many achievements and accolades, the most prestigious being that of President of the American College of Surgeons.

I remember another memorable afternoon, on yet another golf course, on Sea Island, Ga, with Alec and I trying to take a dollar or two off of our mutual good friend, and trauma surgeon of renown, Peter Mucha. I recall fondly Alec being the Balfour visiting professor and, subsequently, the Irving Cooper lecturer in Rochester. On both occasions, he left town

leaving behind young minds influenced, probably forever, by his wisdom, his wit, his charm, and perhaps, above all, by his impeccable manners. I remember sadly him being awarded the distinguished Mayo Alumnus Award—an award that was marred by his premature death and that was accepted by his better half, Irene, with an elegant “typically Alec” speech “on behalf of Luvvie” (which she often called him even on formal occasions). Memorable moments all. Memories that shall never fade.

Alec was one of the initial speakers in Rollin Hanlon’s series of lectures dealing with the humanities at the annual meeting of the American College of Surgeons. The title of his initial presentation was: “Are cultured surgeons better surgeons?” He felt so. In this gem of a talk, he philosophized: “Perspective on both the tradition of medicine and the forces that presently assail it, an understanding of medicine’s role in society and its place among the disci-

plines of human knowledge may be of use in coming to terms with medicine’s radical uncertainty. Above all, the humanities remind us that physicians treat the human condition.” Alec taught everyone he influenced that, above all, to treat the human condition was paramount.

I bid sad farewell to Alec Walt at his American College of Surgeons Presidential Dinner in New Orleans. His sense of humor and compassion for mankind was still present, despite being wracked with pain from a fatal malignancy and wearing a wig chosen by his dear wife. In a quiet corner of the banquet room, surrounded by hundreds of surgeons, we quietly said our respective farewells. He told me how proud he was of me and I told him how much I loved him. A few months later he died. I have often wondered just how many lives Alec guided as he has mine.

Thank you, Alec. I miss you, my friend.

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