In Memoriam: Earl Baker Wert, M.D. (1913-2001)

Earl B. Wert, a Past-President and Founding Fellow of the Association of Clinical Scientists, died in Mobile, AL, on 23 July 2001, following a massive, acute myocardial infarction.

Earl was born in Philadelphia, PA, on 26 May 1913 and was raised in Collingswood, NJ. His father, Earl H. Wert, was a banker at the Southwark National Bank in Philadelphia. His mother, Ada, died while Earl was an adolescent and his father then married Eva Bell, who also worked in banking. Earl attended Collingswood High School, where he was a star on the track and football teams.

After three years as an English major at Lafayette College in Easton, PA, Earl entered the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, where he received the M.D. degree in 1940. Earl was an intern (1940-42) and resident in pathology (1942-44) at the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. He entered the United States Army and served (1945-47) as a pathologist at the Army Institute of Pathology in Washington, DC. While at AIP (which is now AFIP), he worked with Dr. Hans Smetana and he met Ellen, his future wife, who was also stationed there. In 1947, Earl became Instructor in Pathology at Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, where he assisted Dr. Shields Warren and Dr. William Meissner.

In 1948, Earl and Ellen moved to Mobile, AL, where he and Dr. Milton Wise organized a pathology laboratory to serve the Mobile Infirmary, the Mobile County Hospital, and local physicians. Soon, Earl was elected Mobile County Coroner and he continued in that capacity for three decades. Although his work at AIP and Harvard had been focused on anatomic pathology, Earl became an expert in many facets of clinical and forensic pathology. He was adept at establishing the cause of death in homicide cases and was a pioneer in post-mortem analysis of vitreous humor. He was Director of Pathology at the Mobile Infirmary until he retired in 1986.

On 8 September 1954, Earl attended the ASCP Workshop on Clinical Hemoglobinometry, held at the US Naval Medical School in Bethesda, MD. This seminal event in continuing medical education was presented by 29 clinical pathologists and clinical chemists who called themselves “The Clinical Science Club” and was attended by 120 participants. I met Earl on that occasion and we formed a friendship that has lasted ever since. Earl joined The Clinical Science Club and in 1956 he was among the 107 Founding Fellows who each contributed $10 to defray the costs of its incorporation as the Association of Clinical Scientists. During the next 35 years, Earl regularly attended the Association’s meetings.
Earl was recognized by the Association as “Clinical Scientist of the Year” in 1959; he was elected Vice-President of the Association in 1961 and became its President in 1962. He organized the Association’s meetings in Mobile, AL, in 1959 and 1969. At the 1959 meeting, he demonstrated the Coulter electronic cell counter and Technicon multichannel autoanalyzer, which were in operation at the Mobile Infirmary. His scientific presentations at other meetings included lectures on automation of urinalysis [1], automation of leukocyte differential counts [2], erythrocyte cryopreservation [3], and the physiological benefits of fitness training [4]. His talks were always timely, informative, practical, and enriched by gentle humor.

Earl was also active in the College of American Pathologists, the American College of Physicians, and the American Medical Association, as well as local and state societies of pathologists and physicians.

Earl’s avocations included music (he played piano and loved chamber music, especially the works of Carl Dittersdorf), foreign languages (he was fluent in French, and proficient in German and classical Greek), travel (he and Ellen often toured Europe, sometimes accompanied by their children), history (he studied the naval blockade of Mobile during the Civil War and the Battle of Verdun during World War I), and athletics (he was good at tennis and an avid runner). He took up running at age 65, often competed in the Boston Marathon, and held five age-group records for the Pike’s Peak Race in Colorado.

In addition to serving as county coroner, Earl was prominent in civic affairs. From 1966-78, Earl was the Consul of France for Mobile, AL. He was President of the Mobile Chamber Music Society during 1976-77. For many years, he was a member of the Spring Hill Avenue United Methodist Church.

Earl was a devoted husband and a loving father. He is survived by his wife, Ellen R. Wert of Mobile; one daughter, Linda Wert Olen of Mobile; four sons, John (Peet) Wert of Mobile, Cyrus Wert of Cambridge, ID; Michael Wert, M.D., of Greensboro, NC, and Eric Wert, D.V.M., of Cheney, WA, 14 grandchildren, and other relatives.

At the Memorial Service in Mobile, Donald E. Bruckiewicz, Jr., a prominent attorney, said of Earl: “I’ve known him for over 30 years. I was never around him when he wasn’t laughing or in good spirits. He accepted everybody. He treated everybody the same.” These comments aptly capture Earl’s integrity, warmth, vitality, and good nature.

On behalf of the members of the Association of Clinical Scientists, I sadly convey our condolences to Earl’s widow, Ellen, their children, and their grandchildren.

F. William Sunderman Jr., M.D.
Whiting, VT

References