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MEMORIAM

In memoriam: Denton A. Cooley (1920–2016)



Professor Dr. Denton A. Cooley who died a few days ago at the age of 96 was undoubtedly the foremost cardiac surgeon of his time.

A native of Houston, Texas he studied medicine at the University of Texas in Austin and served as a fellow at Johns Hopkins, in Baltimore, under Alfred Blalock, the father of the Blalock-Taussig operation which changed the life of babies with Tetralogy of Fallot. He also trained under Lord Brock in London.

Returning to Houston, he joined another outstanding figure Michael E. DeBakey to render Baylor University the great cardiac surgery center of the 60's and 70's. He subsequently created the Texas Heart Institute which soon became what was then the leading cardiac surgery center in the world. Denton Cooley was a surgeon of unbelievable dexterity. He never repeated a movement and his operating times were incredibly short although he appeared to work in a very relaxed way.

He was a consummate congenital heart operator, an expert in valve and bypass surgery.

He performed the first operation on an aortic aneurysm (1949), repair of a post infarction ventricular septal defect

(1950) and excision of a left ventricular aneurysm (1958) among others.

He pioneered new methods in extracorporeal bypass, performed a great number of the first cardiac transplants and inserted the first total artificial heart in a human, on April 4, 1969.

At the night, being the cardiology fellow on call, I slept next to the patient Haskell Karp in the surgical suite which was used as super-intensive care unit.

Denton Cooley was also a prolific innovator of techniques, a man of original ideas, a tireless worker and great organizer. His book "100.000 Hearts" published in 2012 is very easily and pleasantly read, despite condensing a huge amount of data and achievements. He authored 12 books, more than 1400 publications and innumerable honors.

Apart from a surgeon and a scientist, Dr. Cooley was a star basketball player in his college years, an excellent tennis and golf player and all-around athlete. An extremely handsome man of very tall stature, he was a great host, a generous and friendly and helpful personality. He helped a huge number of Greek patients, waiving his personal fee. His patients whenever he came to Greece always gave him the warmest ovations.

I am grateful that while training in Houston (1967–1970) under my chief and mentor Robert D. Leachman I had the godsent opportunity to work alongside this man of destiny, who also helped me in many ways and occasions. I had the privilege in meeting him from the last time in April 2015. It should also be mentioned that a very large number of Greek cardiologists and cardiac surgeons were associated with this legendary man and were profoundly influenced by his aura.

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