Dr. John Skandalakis, 1920–2009

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Received: 4 December 2009 / Accepted: 9 December 2009 / Published online: 24 December 2009
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Dr. John Skandalakis died peacefully in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, on August 29th, 2009, after battling leukemia. He is fondly remembered by his family, friends, colleagues, and the thousands of medical students and residents who were privileged to benefit from his Socratic method of teaching in both surgery and anatomy.

John Skandalakis was born in Molai, Sparta, in Greece in 1920. He graduated in Medicine from the University of Athens, following which he served in the Greek Royal Navy from 1946 to 1950. During World War II, he fought with the Greek Resistance and was awarded a medal by the Greek government for his efforts. Following World War II, he was involved in the Greek civil war, overcoming the communist insurgency.

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In 1950, he married and settled in Atlanta, Georgia, completing his surgical training at Grady Memorial Hospital, St. Joseph's Infirmary, and Piedmont Hospital. In 1962, he obtained his doctorate in Anatomy from Emory University. During his professional career at Emory University, he served as Professor of Surgery, Professor of Anatomy, and Professor of Surgical Anatomy and Technique. Dr. Skandalakis became the Chris Carlos Distinguished Professor of Surgical Anatomy and Technique, teaching medical students and residents the art and science of surgical technique and anatomy using the Socratic method. Thousands of students benefited from his approach, and many were inspired to embark upon a surgical career as a result of his teaching. The John Skandalakis Professor of Surgery Chair was endowed in his honor at Emory University School of Medicine. His clinical surgical practice at Piedmont Hospital commenced in 1956 and he retired in 1989, continuing an active academic career in anatomy and surgical technique.

Dr. Skandalakis led a full life serving the Greek Orthodox Church in Atlanta until his death. He was politically instrumental in promoting Greek–American relations and facilitated the founding of the School of Law at Georgia State University. He received multiple honors for his service to medicine, his church, and his community.

Dr. Skandalakis authored over 300 publications, including books, book chapters, scientific articles, and monographs. He is best known for his books “Embryology for Surgeons”, “Surgical Anatomy and Technique: A Pocket Manual”, and “Anatomical Complications in General Surgery”. He wrote extensively on applied clinical anatomy, including that of hernia repair and management. He was a founding member of the American Association of Clinical Anatomists and the American Hernia Society, as well as a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons.

His passion was the teaching and application of surgical anatomy. As anatomy teaching has assumed a position of less importance in medical school curricula country-wide, John Skandalakis championed the cause of clinicians remaining involved in anatomy teaching. He stressed that excellence in surgery could only be achieved when surgeons had an intimate understanding of applied anatomy, a concept assuming increasing importance in an era of minimally invasive surgery. He felt that he was often a lone voice in the wilderness stressing the importance of

clinician involvement in anatomy teaching, yet, he continued to speak boldly on the subject. Like his bold Spartan ancestors who were noted for their courage and determination in battle, John stood his ground.

Dr. John Skandalakis was an example to us all of commitment to excellence in surgery as well as in our personal lives. He will be sorely missed by those who benefited from his teaching and inspiration. His legacy will endure in the lives of the many surgeons that he helped to train.