In memoriam: Hitoshi Shirotani (1927–2014)

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Professor Hitoshi Shirotani was the chairman of the 44th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Japanese Association for Thoracic Surgery, as well as a supreme cardiac surgeon and leader of this field. Sadly he passed away on 19 January 2014, aged 86 in his home town in Nishinomiya, Hyogo.

Prof. Shirotani was born on 23 February 1927 in Fukuzaki-cho, Hyogo Prefecture, and graduated from Faculty of Medicine, Kyoto University in 1949. After graduation, he worked at the Second Department of Surgery, Faculty of Medicine, Kyoto University and made major contribution to the early development of cardiac surgery at Kyoto University and played the leading role. He shifted to Hyogo Prefectural Amagasaki Hospital to establish cardiac surgical service there. He performed

many surgeries for congenital complex cardiac anomalies and significantly improved the results, while developing the hospital into one of the centers for pediatric cardiac surgery in Japan. During those days, Prof. Shirotani and his colleagues developed the deep hypothermic circulatory arrest method, which is well known as the “Kyoto technique”. This technique is one of the major milestone in the world history of cardiac surgery.

Prof. Shirotani was appointed as the professor of Kinki University Faculty of Medicine on 1 July 1977 and established the Department of Cardiac Surgery as the professor and chairman. In those days, the department included a team of pediatric cardiologists, in addition to cardiac surgeons, and thus was more like a center of pediatric cardiac surgery and cardiology. The concept of “heart team” is now considered to be essential to present cardiac practice. But, Prof. Shirotani actually operated a “heart team” about 40 years ago. This is a good example of his forethought and leadership.

He performed his excellent surgical technique on complex cardiac anomalies. His technique of Mustard procedure was particularly outstanding. The methods how to excise the intratrial septum and baffle design, which were uniquely developed by Prof. Shirotani, solved problems adherent to Mustard procedure. Thus, in my opinion, such surgery should called “Shirotani procedure”, rather than the modified Mustard procedure. I remember well that, when I asked him, “How did you achieve this level of surgery?” he answered, “You can only understand the important point of a surgery after you actually experience the surgery several times and refer to an anatomy text.” This comment shows his remarkable ability and foresight as a cardiac surgeon. However, he also easily changed his surgical policy from Mustard surgery, his specialty, to Arterial Switch, as soon as the Lecompte method came out.

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This shows his humility and good sense to see changes and embrace progress.

We started the program of coronary artery bypass grafting at Kinki University Hospital later than at another institutes. At that time, Prof. Shirotani designated me, a junior staff aged around 30, as a charged surgeon for coronary artery bypass surgery, despite many objections. His reason for this decision was that we could only catch up and pass over another institutes in coronary bypass surgery in future if a younger person led the team. I am sure Prof. Shirotani evaluated my work, but once he was convinced, he made a clear decision with great foresight and regardless of the seniority-based system. This image of Prof. Shirotani may have generated misunderstanding among some people, but it speaks of his strong leadership qualities.

In those days, the Apple computer had just come out. Prof. Shirotani gave precise instructions to young staff on playing with computer games late nights. Then, he observed our play to decode the program behind the game. There was no good software available, but he established an original database and performed all procedures from

data checking and entry to management for his department. Later, computerized information processing became one of his specialties. He should be remembered as one of the pioneers of database development in the field of clinical medicine.

After leaving his office as chairman and professor, Prof. Shirotani put his effort into construction, establishment and management of Kinki University Nara Hospital. The hospital stands like a monument to his compilation.

In recent times, he declined all requests for honorary posts and participated in few meetings. He seemed to enjoy his life after retirement. I still feel his calmness and graciousness.

There are so many examples of the great influence of Prof. Shirotani. My heart is flooded with memories of him that I cannot express in words. There are many persons who knew him so much better than I, but Prof. Shirotani influenced and educated me from the beginning of my career as a cardiac surgeon as well as a person until today. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Shirotani and extend my deepest condolences to his family.