John D. Strain, MD (1951–2018)

Laura Z. Fenton¹ · Thomas C. Hay¹

Received: 18 July 2018 / Accepted: 27 July 2018 / Published online: 27 August 2018
© Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2018

Dr. John D. Strain, a leader in the pediatric imaging community, died June 22, 2018, after a courageous battle with advanced-stage esophageal cancer. He was 67 years old. John is remembered as an innovator with the utmost common sense and perseverance. He would be delighted, grinning broadly, when complex ideas came to fruition, but he would be equally amazed when the simplest tasks would falter, when he would sigh and exclaim, “We’ll just keep at it!” He was limitless in his curiosity and energy.

John was a Denver native who grew up in a loving family with three siblings, an influential physician father and an

encouraging and supportive stay-at-home mother. John’s father, Dr. James E. Strain, is an acclaimed pediatrician and former president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

John was a tremendous athlete. He began swimming at age 4, competed in his first out-of-state swim meet at age 8 and held every state record in freestyle throughout high school. He was a distinguished three-sport athlete, also playing football (all-state quarterback) and baseball (all-state pitcher). He even led the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) in strikeouts and earned run average (ERA) on a talented all-star baseball team. The Minnesota Twins were planning to draft him out of high school, but when his mom received the call, she simply told them not to bother because “Johnny was going to college!” John’s passion for baseball continued throughout his life, and he held season tickets for the Colorado Rockies from the beginning of the franchise.

John attended the University of Northern Colorado on a baseball scholarship, earning a Bachelor of Science in chemistry. Upon graduation, he attended the University of Colorado School of Medicine, where his first love was surgery. After completing a surgical internship, he knew it was not a good fit and instead did emergency medicine locums for a year. During that time, he honed his golf game and even competed in the PGA qualifying tournament in Chicago!

John’s final elective in medical school was radiology. He credits the strong mentoring and teaching of Dr. Paul Siebert, chair of radiology at the Denver U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital, as the spark to his career. John discovered he had a keen eye, could identify abnormalities quickly, and remembered patients through their imaging. A month-long rotation during residency at Denver Children’s Hospital (now Children’s Hospital Colorado) under Dr. Jack Campbell clarified his career path.

Upon completing pediatric radiology fellowship training at Denver Children’s Hospital, he accepted his first and only job — at Denver Children’s Hospital. He was promoted to chairman after 5 years, a position he excelled in for the next 28 years. Through the Society for Pediatric Radiology (SPR), he was mentored by the best pediatric radiologists, including Drs.

✉ Laura Z. Fenton
laura.fenton@childrenscolorado.org

¹ Division of Pediatric Radiology, Children’s Hospital Colorado, University of Colorado School of Medicine, 13123 E. 16th Ave., B125, Aurora, CO 80045, USA

John Kirkpatrick, Ed Singleton, Dave Baker and Walter Berdon. In the late 1980s, political challenges at the university led the entire pediatric radiology faculty to leave the practice — except him. A model of resilience, John worked as the sole pediatric radiologist at Denver Children’s Hospital for nearly a year while he honed his signature efficiency. He spearheaded growth of the faculty from 1 (himself) to the current 24, all with sub-specialty expertise. John’s leadership style was reflected in the subsequent stability of the Denver Children’s Hospital/Children’s Hospital Colorado faculty: only six radiologists left the practice during his chairmanship. John was the consummate chairman, a beacon of strength and advocacy, politically strong when necessary, winning fierce battles to maintain faculty autonomy and avoiding fragmentation of pediatric imaging. John had an open-door policy and supportive attitude, was always available for a discussion, gave his full attention, and responded thoughtfully after a short pause/reflection. The wonderful comradery and loyalty of his team are a direct reflection of his compassion and dedication to the highest quality of health care for children.

Throughout his career, John displayed exceptional leadership skills at the local, state and national levels. He saw the big picture, thought outside the box and offered insight that had not been considered. At Denver Children’s Hospital/Children’s Hospital Colorado, after serving on numerous committees, he quickly chaired them, including the medical board, board of directors, medical staff nominating committee and numerous task forces. He was instrumental in organizing, planning and developing hospital informatics. At the state level, he served as treasurer, president-elect and president of the Colorado Radiological Society. At the national level, John was especially active in SCORCH (Society of Chiefs of Radiology in Children’s Hospitals), serving as president in 2002–2003.

John was an outstanding “generalist” in an era of subspecialization but also held a Certificate of Added Qualification (CAQ) in neuroimaging. John believed in and encouraged communication with referring physicians at Denver Children’s Hospital/Children’s Hospital Colorado, always making time for consultation, developing and leading multidisciplinary conferences and embracing new technology. He was instrumental in developing indication-driven decision

support for order entry. John’s tireless work ethic and passion for optimizing pediatric imaging mentored radiologists and clinicians alike by example.

John was a gifted and dynamic educator. He connected with every level of learner from the child to the professional. Our faculty’s children remember John’s thoughtful practical teaching while hosting department picnics at his home! As the director of the pediatric radiology fellowship for nearly 20 years, he was a tremendous role model, mentoring over 25 pediatric radiology fellows and countless residents. John supported education through technology and implemented our Integrated Radiology Information System (IRIS) digital teaching file in 2008. The teaching file now has greater than 24,000 cases and will continue to benefit residents and fellows for generations to come.

John received many honors for his excellence and leadership, including Children’s Hospital Colorado’s highest physician honor, the James E. Strain award (named after his father) in 2018, the prestigious Singleton-Taybi award at the annual SPR 2018 meeting, and Denver’s *5,280 Magazine* “Top Doc” award for 23 consecutive years (since its inception).

John’s utmost pride and joy was his family. Julie, his wife of 26 years, was the light of his life. They have three sons: JJ (currently a sophomore at Villanova University) and twins James and Jonas (now juniors at Cherry Creek High School). John’s love and aptitude for athletics live on in his sons, who are competitive in swimming, baseball and basketball. John, Julie and the boys are all certified divers. John said his favorite vacation day would be scuba diving in the morning and a round of golf in the afternoon in Hawaii. John welcomed distractions from his work by phone calls from either Julie or his sons — he would develop a broad smile, relax, elevate his tone and enthusiasm, and often just chuckle at what he was asked or told, before returning to work with enlightened vigor.

Despite John’s illness, retirement was never part of his equation. He was totally devoted to Children’s Hospital, holding meetings remotely until a week before his death. We are fortunate to have known and worked with such a brilliant man. John’s light will shine forth brightly in all the lives he touched.