Giants of Orthopaedics

Giants of Orthopaedic Surgery: Richard J. Smith MD

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Richard (Dick) J. Smith MD was a fine educator, author, and clinician who inspired many to enter the then-new subspecialty of hand surgery. One particular

meeting I had with Dick was both auspicious and prophetic.

“Do you want a cat?” Dick asked as I helped him suture a carpal tunnel operation.

“Yes,” I replied, recalling that my tabby, Penelope, disappeared from my friend’s house while I was in Europe.

“Well then, okay; but you’ll have to come to Scarsdale for an interview.”

Thus did the feline avatar of Dick Smith (Fig. 1) enter my life.

I was a second-year resident of orthopaedic surgery at the Hospital for

Joint Diseases in New York City where Dick was serving as Chief in the Division of Hand Surgery. I learned that Dick’s son, James, had become allergic to their cat Sam, so Sam needed a new home. My wife and I drove to Scarsdale, NY, USA for the interrogation.

As soon as we stepped into the home and sat down on the couch, a lovely cat jumped on my lap and started purring. The three Smith children, Lisa, Tracey, and James, told me that Sam never did this for anyone before that moment. Needless to say, he was ours.

Once Sam entered our home, it did not take me long to realize that celestial forces had somehow imbued this remarkable animal with many characteristics so evident in Dick. Based on my own recollections, and discussions with several of Dick’s colleagues, the similarities between Dick and his feline avatar began to pile up. Here follows some examples.

Both Sam Smith-Green and Dick were exemplary representatives of their respective species. In Sam’s case, *Felis catus domestica*, Siamese Blue-Point, and in Dick’s phylogeny, *Homo Chirurghimanus*, (The Hand Surgeon), a species whose evolutionary history

Note from the Editor-In-Chief: In “Giants of Orthopaedic Surgery,” a columnist explores the life and achievements of an orthopaedic surgeon who changed our profession, by interviewing other surgeons whose lives the “Giant” touched through mentorship or collaboration, or by using other historical sources that provide similar insight. We welcome reader feedback on all of our columns and articles; please send your comments to eic@clinOrthop.org.

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Fig. 1 Richard (Dick) J. Smith MD moved to Massachusetts General Hospital in 1972 where he was named Chief of the Hand and Upper Extremity Service. Published with permission from Massachusetts General Hospital.

Giants of Orthopaedics

I described in a prior column in this journal [2].

Both Sam and Dick were quick learners. Sam's education, however, ended with proper use of the litter box, whereas Dick's extended far beyond toilet training. After a general surgery internship at Bellevue Hospital in New York, Dick received his orthopaedic surgery education at the Hospital for Joint Diseases [4]. While there, Dr. Emanuel Kaplan, a renowned authority in hand function and anatomy [3, 4], persuaded Dick to obtain additional training in the newly evolving field of hand surgery. After 2 years in the Public Health Service stationed in Boston, MA, USA, Dick traveled for a 1-year hand fellowship, splitting his time between Los Angeles, CA, USA with Joseph Boyes MD (editor of *Bunnell's Surgery of the Hand—Fourth Edition* [1]) and Derby, England, with Dr. R. Guy Pulvertaft [4].

Both Sam and Dick were kind and friendly to whomever crossed their paths, especially youngsters. In Sam's situation, my infant children could pull his tail, stick their fingers in his ears, and even sit on him without causing the animal any consternation. In Dick's example, he would, on morning rounds, ask questions about hand function, anatomy, and surgery to the most junior resident present that morning. If the young doctor did not

know the answer, he avoided condescension or humiliation, so common in the world of academic medicine. Instead, he simply asked a more senior resident, and if that person did not know, then the hand surgery fellow, who almost always had the proper answer. Dick would then amplify the response, filling in historical and technical details, depending upon the situation.

"Dick was a great educator in that his presentations were clearly thought out and presented with great wit," Dr. Martin A. Posner, Chief in the Division of Hand Surgery at New York University School of Medicine wrote in an email to CORR®. "He also influenced many young surgeons, myself included, to become hand surgeons." In fact, Dick arranged for Dr. Posner to have the exact fellowship training he had, first with Dr. Boyes followed by some time with Dr. Pulvertaft.

"He was inspirational in that regard," Dr. Posner wrote.

Dick moved to Boston in 1972 to become Chief of the Hand and Upper Extremity Service at Massachusetts General Hospital. That same year, Sam also moved out of New York City. He went with my family first to San Diego and then Long Beach, CA, USA where he remained for the rest of his life.

As a protégée of Dr. Kaplan, Dick emphasized—at the bedside and in his

publications—functional and surgical hand anatomy. He often focused on the remarkable features of the intrinsic interosseous and lumbrical muscles. I distinctly recall how he would flex his metacarpophalangeal joints while simultaneously extending the interphalangeal joints to demonstrate intrinsic function of these small, but extremely important, muscles of the hand.

(Sam lacked this ability, having been declawed.)

"What makes any individual special or a 'Giant' in his or her field can usually be grouped into tangible and intangible accomplishments," Dr. Posner wrote. "For the former, physicians can be judged by a great discovery they make. That would be more likely for those engaged in basic research than those who are clinicians, and Dick Smith was a clinician. For clinicians, we can judge them by the articles they have written in the medical literature. That too often is focused on quantity over quality. I have no idea the number of articles Dick Smith wrote, but I do know that most, if not all, were well thought out."

He was known for his publications on rheumatoid deformities of the hand [8], camptodactyly [9], the treatment of infections and tumors of the hand [7], and his final major publication, a monograph, *Tendon Transfers of the Hand and Forearm* [6]. According to

Giants of Orthopaedics

Dr. Posner, the paper that solidified Dick's standing among his peers as a "Giant" in the field of hand surgery was his 1974 study on the anatomy and function of the hand [5]. In it, Dick meticulously describes the concepts and principals regarding the mechanics and pathomechanics of finger motion, as well as potential problems involving the intrinsic muscles of the hand.

"To understand deformity and abnormality requires an appreciation of normal function in the hand," Dick wrote. "To study normal function requires an appreciation of anatomy" [5].

His ability to master, demystify, and communicate the complications of the

hand in a clear and concise manner was simply unmatched (Fig. 2).

"Can that one article make someone a 'Giant'?" Dr. Posner wrote in an email to *CORR*[®]. "I don't think so. But if you couple that with Dick's other qualities that had an impact on many hand surgeons of his generation, well, now you're talking."

Steven Z. Glickel MD, is currently the director of the CV Starr Hand Surgery Center at Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. In 1976, Dr. Glickel completed a residency in Orthopedic Surgery at the Harvard Combined Orthopedic Program. This program included Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, and Boston Children's Hospital.

Although on a different track, Dr. Glickel managed to spend some time with Dick and even operated with him as a resident.

"We have some excellent educators in our field," Dr. Glickel said in a phone interview with *CORR*[®]. "But Dick Smith would have to be at the top of anyone's list. He could communicate to students at any level. The word I always come back to is 'engaging.' Of course, he was tough at times and demanding. But you knew that he was trying to get the best out of you. I just had the feeling that he could be someone I could emulate."

In 1980, Dick became Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Harvard Medical School. Two years later, he was named President of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH). Meanwhile, Sam, 3000 miles from his kindred spirit, wisely spent his time at a window, watching birds.

Roy A. Meals MD, Clinical Professor of orthopaedic surgery at the University of California at Los Angeles, Editor-In-Chief of the *Journal of Hand Surgery*, and a Past President of ASSH, worked alongside Dick for a year as a hand surgery fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Meals found himself routinely in awe of Dick's boundless intellect, curiosity, and sheer love for his work.

"He may not have the name recognition of some of the others, But

Fig. 2 Dick's ability to master, demystify, and communicate the complications of the hand was unmatched. Published with permission from Massachusetts General Hospital.

Giants of Orthopaedics

Dick will certainly live on in all of us,” Dr. Meals said in a phone interview with *CORR*®. “He was a powerful influence. It will be up to us to pass that enthusiasm and exuberant positive outlook onto the next generation of hand surgeons.”

Within a couple of years of each other, in the late-1980s, both Sam and Dick succumbed prematurely to malignancies; in Sam’s case, feline leukemia, and in Dick’s, a glioma of the brain. On May 30, 2014, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School celebrated the 25th Annual Richard J. Smith Residents/Fellows Conference, also known as Smith Day, in recognition of Dick’s devotion to “education, the pursuit of excellence and the advancement of the specialty of hand surgery.” [4]. The conference also commemorated Dick’s legacy by establishing the Richard J. Smith Memorial Lectureship, a forum for hand surgeons to present new findings and original research [4].

Dick’s legacy will live on in more ways than one. While my daughter was still in her crib, Sam Smith-Green would join her at night, licking her head before they both fell asleep. Although I did not realize it at the time, the cat was purposefully transferring cosmic hand surgeon energy to my baby girl. Around the time Dick passed away, Hillary Green Redlin commenced an academic journey that culminated in her becoming an orthopaedic hand surgeon. Thus did the avatar of Dick Smith fulfill its destiny, transcending time and distance.

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