Obituary

Obituary: A Remembrance of Richard H. Fisher MD (1923–2015)

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Richard H. Fisher MD, former President of The Association of Bone and Joint Surgeons®, passed away on Sunday, August 16 at the age of 91.

A prominent physician, educator, and community leader in his hometown of Salem, VA, USA, Dr. Fisher (Fig. 1) helped establish medical and educational foundations in and around Roanoke County, VA, USA.

Dr. Fisher was born and raised in Salem, the youngest of seven children. “His parents were farmers who instilled in their children the motivation to work hard, study hard, and lead meaningful lives,” Dr. Fisher’s

daughter, Anne Katherine Fisher Andrews said.

Dr. Fisher took those lessons and applied them to both academics and the athletic fields. He excelled in sports, receiving a football scholarship to the University of Richmond where he was named to the All-Southern Conference team.

He received his medical degree from the Medical College of Virginia in 1947. While in Richmond, VA, USA he met his future wife Anne Katherine Fletcher. They married in 1948 and raised six children, three girls (Anne, Gwynn, Amy) and three boys (Richard Jr., Bob, Jim).

During his residency, while on a hand-surgery rotation, Dr. Fisher expressed to Anne his deep admiration for Dr. Sterling Bunnell, who is considered “The father of hand surgery.” Anne wrote to Dr. Bunnell, asking him to sign Dr. Fisher’s copy of Dr. Bunnell’s classic, *Surgery of the Hand* [1]. Dr. Bunnell graciously complied. This began a wonderful friendship that lasted until Dr. Bunnell’s death in 1957.

“My father kept Dr. Bunnell’s picture in his office throughout the span of his career,” Dr. Fisher’s daughter, Gwynn said.

After serving his country in the Air Force and Navy, Dr. Fisher moved his

Fig. 1 Richard H. Fisher MD. (Published with permission from Helen Fisher).

family to Roanoke, VA, USA where he practiced orthopaedic surgery for 34 years at Lewis-Gale Medical Center. Considered a pillar in the community, Dr. Fisher (along with four other physicians) created the Lewis-Gale Medical Foundation in 1964 with the goal of helping facilitate continuing medical education. The purpose of the foundation was “to encourage, support and promote medical progress in the Roanoke Valley” [5]. Since its inception, the Lewis-Gale Medical Foundation, which is now called Health Focus of Southwest Virginia, has awarded more than USD 3.5 million in scholarships for students in

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Obituary

various health fields. In 2014, the foundation celebrated 50 years of serving its community [5].

Dr. Fisher also took part in medical societies, including the ABJS where he would serve as its president from 1974–1975. Dr. Kay Clawson worked alongside Dr. Fisher when he was secretary of the ABJS and Dr. Clawson was the secretary-elect.

“Dick completely changed my attitude toward physicians in private practice,” Dr. Clawson told *CORR*®. “At the time, the ABJS was mostly an academic group—full-time faculty at various universities. The private physicians would take care of the patients in the trenches, not us academics. I never thought you could do both. But Dick was truly a private practitioner who was also an academic. He changed my way of thinking.”

Dr. Fisher contributed to *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* [2, 4], studying the efficacy of one-stage plaster correction of scoliosis following spine fusion [2], as well as *CORR*®, where he examined radial and ulnar artery injuries [3]. In addition, Dr. Fisher was a Guest Editor of two symposia of *CORR*® in 1963 and 1974.

In private practice, Dr. Fisher was a leader in joint replacement surgery. He performed the first total hip replacement in Roanoke and was instrumental in introducing screening for scoliosis in Virginia schools.

Fig. 2 The Salem High School football team honored Dr. Fisher for his work and leadership in the community. (Published with permission from Helen Fisher).

One of Dr. Fisher’s greatest accomplishments, according to his family, was establishing the Salem Educational Foundation in 1983. That year, the foundation awarded two scholarships. But the organization grew under Dr. Fisher’s leadership as president, a position he held for 17 years. As of this year, the Salem Educational Foundation has awarded nearly USD 3 million of scholarships to Salem High School graduates [6].

Dr. Fisher had a private practice, founded a medical foundation, and

took on leadership roles in medical societies—yet he still found time to be an attentive father.

“As long as I can remember, I always wanted to be a nurse,” Dr. Fisher’s daughter Amy said. “From a young age, Dad would take me with him when he made rounds. We would use the stairs instead of the elevator and eat in the hospital cafeteria. I remember Dad working all hours of the day and night. He was excited and passionate about medicine and taking care of people. One of my favorite

Obituary

memories is Dad pinning me the night before I graduated with my [Bachelor of Science in Nursing].”

Though his playing days ended long before, Dr. Fisher discovered a way to combine his passion for sports and medicine.

“When the Salem Rebels ice hockey team came to town in 1967, my dad became their team doctor,” Jim Fisher, Dr. Fisher’s son said. “Going to games with him, then following him into the locker room after the games led to some of my best memories.”

At one time or another, Dr. Fisher was the team doctor for three different local high school football teams and a semipro football team, according to Jim. The Salem High School football team honored Dr. Fisher at halftime of a game in November 2005 for his work and leadership in the community (Fig. 2). He even sponsored several classes of student nurses and attended their basketball games. Many of his patients included injured athletes ... and family members.

“My siblings and I also provided our share of lacerations, stitches, broken bones, and surgeries,” Andrews said.

Dr. Fisher’s wife of 52 years, Anne, died on October 18, 2000. In 2005, Dr. Fisher, at the age of 81, married Helen Smith (Fig. 3). Helen and Dr. Fisher had worked together on projects for the ABJS when he was on the Executive Committee and she was Executive Secretary from

Fig. 3 In 2005, Dr. Fisher, at the age 81, married Helen Smith. (Published with permission from Helen Fisher).

1973 to 1978. He and Anne hosted an ABJS meeting in Caracas, Venezuela in 1975, where they developed a close friendship with Helen and stayed in touch following that meeting.

“I was a recently widowed freelance editor in 2004 when Richard asked me to edit a history project he was working on,” Helen Fisher told *CORK*[®]. “The project was on Andrew Lewis, a brilliant and unsung hero of the Revolutionary War who was one of George Washington’s generals. This project appealed to me. The rest is history.”

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Obituary

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