Obituary

Paul C. Wetzig, MD (1922-2006)

Ophthalmology lost a notable physician when Paul C. Wetzig died on January 9, 2006, at home attended by his beloved family after a valiant struggle with Parkinson’s disease. Paul was born in Pueblo, Colo, in 1922 and graduated from Pueblo Central High School. He received his college degree from the University of Denver and his medical degree from the University of Colorado School of Medicine in 1946. He interned at the Marine Hospital of the US Public Health Service on Staten Island in New York. It was here he met Doreen Brugger, who became his loving wife over the ensuing 59 years. He spent 2 years in the Public Health Service prior to completing 3 years of ophthalmology residency at Cornell University Medical College–New York Hospital under the tutelage of John McLean, MD. In these years, he developed a close relationship with Edward Dunlap, MD, as well as fellow resident Edward Norton, MD. These friendships lasted 54 and 44 years, respectively, until the deaths of his 2 colleagues. He began his clinical practice in 1953 in Colorado Springs, Colo, a community of 45 000 people at that time, and later established the Colorado Springs Eye Clinic in 1958. His physician sons, Carl and Richard, joined him in practice in 1981 and 1987.

Paul had many attributes that propelled him into a very productive career. He was energetic, a hard worker, observant, innovative, and always cognizant of and instrumental in implementing advances in ophthalmology. Xenon photocoagulation was introduced in 1958 by Gerd Meyer-Schwickerath, MD, in Essen, Germany, for treatment of retinal diseases. Paul went to Essen to learn how to use this new instrument from Professor Meyer-Schwickerath. He immediately acquired a Zeiss photocoagulator and was the first to treat patients with diabetic retinopathy with photocoagulation of the retina. This was the first major breakthrough in the treatment of this disease and the precursor of the development of laser therapy. Many patients were referred to his clinic nationally and internationally. Paul also developed a long-standing friendship with Professor Meyer-Schwickerath. Later, Paul became very interested in closed vitreous surgery, which was introduced in 1970 by Robert Machemer, MD, to remove blood from the vitreous in patients with diabetes mellitus. Dr Machemer taught him his first class in vitreous surgery at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in February 1971 and Paul was one of the first pupils. Later in the year, he invited Dr Machemer to operate on 11 patients in Colorado Springs whom he thought would benefit by vitrectomy. Dr Machemer recently related to me that these cases and Paul’s support played a major role in encouraging him to proceed in the development of vitreous surgery. Thus, a new branch of ocular surgery arose, restored vision in patients whose conditions were considered hopeless previously, and continues to evolve.

Paul was a gregarious man and a member of numerous societies. He was a member of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Ophthalmological Society, the Jules Gonin Society, the Retinal Society, and the Eye Study Club. He received the John McLean medal in 1996. He was an honored guest at the American Academy of Ophthalmology in 1980 and was awarded honorary membership by the Gonin Society. He attended many ophthalmological meetings nationally and worldwide. He particularly enjoyed the Gonin Society meetings, where many friendships evolved, and the content and social aspects of the Aspen Retinal Detachment Society meeting. Paul was very socially oriented and had a broad spectrum of interests. He loved outdoor activities. His second home was in Salida, Colo, on the Arkansas River in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. He enjoyed hiking, backpacking, snow skiing, squash, and golf.

Paul had very strong family ties and his legacy is invested in them. He is survived by his wife, Doreen; 2 daughters, Dorrie Brand (Elmira, NY) and Laura Hitch (Colorado Springs); sons Carl (Carol) and Richard; sister Betty Stratford, MD (Seattle, Wash); and 9 grandchildren. He had a full life and enjoyed it thoroughly. In the 5 years that I was aware of his Parkinson’s disease, I never heard him complain. Most remarkable is that an ophthalmologist starting a practice in a small community can make so many important contributions to ophthalmology. He leaves the world a better place for all of us. He will be dearly missed.

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