In Memoriam: William Richard Green, MD (1934-2010)

William Richard “Dick” Green grew up in Paducah, Kentucky, where he was the youngest of 8 children. Dick was proud that he hailed from the same state that produced Frederick Verhoeff, the father of American ophthalmic pathology. While attending high school, he worked a paper route and was a short order cook. He also worked for a laundry service and caddied at a country club. He played the trombone in the high school band and center forward for the basketball team and sang tenor for a church. He received a full scholarship for Centre College, where he met his future wife, Janet Jones. Dick directed a band while at Centre College. He graduated in 1955 and then attended medical school at the University of Louisville. He led his fraternity’s barbershop quartet to several awards. During Janet’s final year at Centre College, Dick met the noted ophthalmologist Arthur Keeney, MD, who was influential in Dick’s career. Dick completed an internship in internal medicine at The New England Medical Center Hospital of Tufts University. He attended postgraduate courses in ophthalmology at Harvard, the Howe Laboratory, and the Retina Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts. He then completed a 2-year ophthalmology residency at Wills Eye Hospital and 2 years of work with Prof Ludwig K. Von Sallmann at the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness, trained under Elson B. Helwig at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, and, importantly, completed a fellowship under the supervision of Lorenz Zimmerman, noted chief of Ophthalmic Pathology at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. He then completed a residency in Anatomic Pathology at Temple and became one of the first persons to be double boarded in ophthalmology and pathology. He was to become the incarnate link between these 2 fields.

After this extensive training, Dick headed the ophthalmic pathology laboratory at Wills for 1 year. He then joined the faculty at the Wilmer Institute under the direction of Ed Maumenee. From that point on, Dick’s career flourished. Over a nearly 40-year span at Wilmer, he published more than 700 articles and numerous chapters and books, delivered dozens of named lectures including the Jackson and Zimmerman lectures, and lectured in hundreds of meetings and courses. He evaluated more than 100,000 ophthalmic pathology cases, a feat in itself that is remarkable. His chapters on retina and uveal tract in Spencer’s Ophthalmic Pathology: An Atlas and Textbook are classics. He trained countless residents and fellows, most of whom are currently world leaders in ophthalmology. Dick won virtually every important award and honor in ophthalmology. Among Dick’s honors were being named the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Endowed Professor at Wilmer and receiving the McLean Medal, the Howe Medal, the Gass Medal, the Zimmerman Medal, the Award of Merit from the Retina Research Foundation, an honorary doctorate of science degree from the University of Louisville, the presidency of the Maryland Ophthalmological Society, and the Alcon Research Institute Award. He was named one of the greatest living ophthalmologists by Ophthalmology Times and received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Ophthalmology. Dick also served as president of the American Ophthalmological Society, an organization that he treasured.

Dick was the ultimate teacher. He perpetually won the teaching award at Wilmer; the Wilmer teaching award is now named after him. Using the Socratic method, he had the rare ability to simultaneously teach medical students, residents, fellows, and practicing ophthalmologists. Everyone who spent time in his laboratory vividly remembers those days. His knowledge was encyclopedic and he demanded excellence in all endeavors. The loyalty of his disciples is legendary and his students are his legacy to ophthalmology. Conversely, Dick was a strong supporter of his trainees.

Dick made important contributions to all aspects of ophthalmic pathology. His seminal papers and reviews are often cited at ophthalmic pathology meetings. He was the king of clinicopathologic correlation. He was especially known for his knowledge of pathology of the retina and contributions to the evolving field of medical retina. Dick clearly demonstrated the importance of having an excellent ophthalmic pathology laboratory and ophthalmic pathologist within the midst of an outstanding ophthalmologic institute. Dick was vital for Wilmer’s success and his mere presence added luster to the institute. He was the link between basic science and clinical care. He was a force of nature, both nationally and internationally. He kept ophthalmologists grounded in facts, eschewed speculation, and based clinical care on sound science. The venue didn’t matter; Dick vociferously stuck to those core principles, sometimes to the chagrin of an unsuspecting neophyte. Those qualities translated to forthrightness, integrity, and soundness of character and were the reason why Dick was so greatly admired. He brought out the best in those around him.

Dick was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He is survived by his loving wife of 54 years, Janet, sons Gordon and Parke, daughter-in-law Nina, and granddaughters Whitney Lynn, Chloe Rose, and Betsy Taylor. Dick was world renowned, larger than life, and a giant in ophthalmology. It is rare to have a mentor for life, but for me, I was fortunate enough to have W. Richard Green as my mentor. I am sure that this is true for others, as Dick touched the lives of countless ophthalmologists. Eye care around the world is better because of Dick and we will sorely miss him.

Hans E. Grossniklaus, MD