OBITUARY

In Memoriam: Joseph Lawton Smith, MD (1929-2011)

Medicine has lost a consummate clinician and educator. Joseph Lawton Smith, MD, died on January 10, 2011, at 81 years of age after complications following surgery for a broken hip.

After medical school at Duke University, residency at Wilmer Eye Institute, fellowship with David Cogan, and a stint on the Duke faculty, Lawton joined the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in 1962 until his retirement in 1993. His tenure there included supremely detailed (“doctor-killing”) examinations and extraordinary teaching skills enhanced by his own particular lexicon. For example, to work hard was to “swing into action totalis”; excessive evaluations exemplified “a blind dog in a meat house”; new technology was “twins smitties”; and a correct answer to a question would earn you a “Now you’re talkin’, doccy.”

Lawton produced 335 articles, books, and editorials, including first reports of ischemic optic neuropathy, fundus findings in choroidal hemangiomas and Leber hereditary optic neuropathy, fluorescein angiographic findings in retinal artery occlusions and giant cell arteritis, radiation therapy for optic nerve sheath meningiomas, and ophthalmic and neurologic manifestations of Lyme disease and seronegative syphilis. In 1978 he founded the Journal of Clinical Neuroophthalmology.

Lawton’s life was dramatically changed when, in 1963, he met one of his old residency classmates, Dr Jack Cooper, who told Lawton he had given his life to Christ. As Lawton said, this “ate into his brain like a rat,” and shortly thereafter he became a Christian as well. His overriding purpose from then on was to know God more intimately, and to encourage others to find the joy and peace that he had found.

R. Michael Siatkowski, MD