In Memoriam: Denis Michael O’Day, MD (1935-2012)

Denis Michael O’Day, MD, passed away on September 9, 2012, following a valiant 3-year battle with glioblastoma. He was 76 years of age. A native of Melbourne, Australia, O’Day was trained in internal medicine in Australia prior to completing a residency in ophthalmology at the University of California, San Francisco, and a fellowship in cornea and external disease at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London.

His career in ophthalmology spanned 4 decades, with a continuing focus on medical education and quality patient care. He joined the faculty at Vanderbilt University in 1972, rising to become chair of the Department of Ophthalmology in 1992. When he stepped down after serving for 10 years, the department was recognized as one of the strongest clinical units in the School of Medicine. In 2002, he established the Emphasis Program, which provided first-year and second-year medical students with faculty mentors. In 2010, Vanderbilt established the Denis M. O’Day Chair in Ophthalmology.

O’Day served the American Board of Ophthalmology (ABO) for more than 17 years, first as an examiner for the oral examinations and item writer for the written examinations and then as a board director. As a board director, O’Day made his biggest contribution as the chair of the written examinations committee. From 1996 through 2006, O’Day served as the executive director of the ABO and through his leadership, the ABO made significant improvements to its written and oral examinations for the initial certification process and introduced the American Board of Medical Specialties Maintenance of Certification, presently a continuous process designed to improve the practice of ophthalmology. O’Day worked diligently to improve the ABO to fulfill its mission of protecting the public, and he did so with infectious enthusiasm that inspired both the board directors and staff that he led.

In response to the news of O’Day’s passing, the ABO office received many acknowledgments from board directors emeritus sharing fond memories of O’Day, including B. Thomas Hutchinson, MD, who wrote:

I was privileged to know and closely work with Denis O’Day over many years, mostly with the [American Academy of Ophthalmology] and the ABO, where he became a leader and an icon for quality driven ophthalmic education, research, credentialing, and in protecting the public interest. His wisdom, integrity, professional loyalty, and commitment for doing the right thing at the right time will be greatly missed by all who knew him; fortunately, his legacy lives on to comfort his family and as an example for others to follow.

John Flynn, MD, stated that “Denis was a giant of a man. Not afraid to speak the truth to power nor to lose his ability to work at every level as a true team player. We shan’t see his likes again nor feel his puckish humor accompanied by his sly Irish grin. We shall miss him.”

O’Day was widely recognized as a leader in ophthalmic education and made significant contributions through the American Academy of Ophthalmology and numerous other ophthalmology organizations. He was recognized by the American Ophthalmological Society with its highest honor, the Lucien Howe Medal, in 2009.

Beyond his chosen profession of medicine, O’Day had a passion ministering to the underserved in Nashville, Tennessee, through work with the Social Justice Committee, and he served as vice chair of the Visiting Foundation, an organization responsible for building and operating a hospital in Haiti.

His family, friends, and colleagues will remember his infectious smile and sense of humor, competitive spirit, and passion for teaching, providing patient-centered care, and striving tirelessly to improve the quality of care for all.

O’Day was the son of the late Kevin and Bernadette O’Day. He is survived by his wife Ann; his sons Luke, Simon, and Edward; grandchildren Ethan, Gwendolyn, Nicole, Oliver, and Jaden; and sisters Justine Hooson, Deidre O’Day, and Prudence Andersen.

O’Day has left an indelible impression on American ophthalmology. His legacy of excellence in medical education and continuous improvement in patient care provide a benchmark for all.

John G. Clarkson, MD

Author Affiliation: Department of Ophthalmology, University of Miami School of Medicine, Miami, Florida.

Correspondence: Dr Clarkson, University of Miami School of Medicine, Department of Ophthalmology, Clinical Research Building, 1120 NW 14th St, 1560-B, Miami, FL 33136 (jclarkson@miami.edu).

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.