Donald M. Shafer, MD (1911-2001)

Donald M. Shafer, MD, a leading retinal surgeon in New York, NY, died on April 4, 2001. He was 89 years old and was living in retirement in Dunedin Isles, Fla, with his wife of 63 years, Ann Brady. In a career spanning more than 40 years, Dr Shafer made significant contributions to the understanding and treatment of vitreoretinal disease. A gifted surgeon, he performed more than 10,000 retinal detachment operations. He also taught and conducted clinical research that led to advances in the treatment of complex retinal detachments.

Early in his career, Dr Shafer developed a special interest in the vitreous. He observed particles in the vitreous of patients with retinal detachment and concluded that these were indicative of retinal tears (at a time when it was still thought that some idiopathic detachments occurred without a tear). Fine particles (“tobacco dust”) in the vitreous became widely regarded as diagnostic of a retinal tear, and their presence was referred to as “Shafer’s sign.” Dr Shafer was among the first to perform a vitrectomy to remove a vitreous hemorrhage, and he reported 6 such cases in 1972. In the same year, he described a total vitrectomy for massive preretinal contraction. An innovative thinker, he replaced the ocular volume with donor vitreous rather than saline and used donor vitreous to restore volume after the drainage of subretinal fluid in cases of retinal detachment.

A graduate of Columbia University and Cornell University Medical School in New York, Don, as he was known to many of his colleagues and friends, interrupted his training in ophthalmology during World War II to serve in the army medical corps, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. After the war he resumed his training at the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital, stayed on as assistant professor, and was eventually appointed surgeon director. In 1968, he joined the New York Hospital–Cornell Medical Center and served as professor and acting chairman of the Division of Ophthalmology until his retirement in 1979.

As a clinical scientist, Dr Shafer leaves a legacy of scientific publications that led to international recognition and awards such as the Lucien Howe Medal and the Pocklington Lectures in London, England. He was a member of Club Jules Gonin (Lausanne, Switzerland) and a charter member of the Retina Society (Boston, Mass). He will be remembered by his colleagues, students, and patients as much for his gentle manner as for his diligent search for the retinal break.

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