G. Richard O'Connor, MD

Former Director of the Francis I. Proctor Foundation and a leading authority in the field of ocular inflammatory disease, G. Richard O'Connor, MD, died August 9, 2007.

Dr O'Connor graduated from Harvard University in 1950, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He completed his medical degree at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he earned the Janeway Prize as the highest-ranked medical student in the class of 1954. He continued residency training in ophthalmology at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. After completion of his residency, Dr O'Connor underwent further training at the National Institutes of Health. He then went to Europe as a US Public Health Service Research Fellow at the University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden, and the State Serum Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark.

After Dr O'Connor's return to the United States, he joined the faculty of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of California at San Francisco and after 8 years was appointed Director of the Francis I. Proctor Foundation for Research in Ophthalmology. He led the Proctor Foundation through a period of remarkable academic growth from 1970 to 1984. During that time, the foundation provided training for internationally regarded luminaries in the field of ocular infection and inflammatory disease.

Dr O'Connor himself made substantial contributions to the field, with particular distinction in the area of ocular toxoplasmosis. His work, which clarified the relative roles of parasite proliferation and hypersensitivity reactions in the pathogenesis of recurrent ocular toxoplasmosis, has had a major effect on current treatment strategies. His research was funded by the National Eye Institute for his entire academic career and he received numerous distinguished awards for his academic contributions, including the Jackson Memorial Lectureship and the Mildred Weisenfeld Award for Excellence in Ophthalmology. He spent many years giving back to the ophthalmology community, serving on numerous National Institutes of Health study sections, the National Advisory Eye Council, and the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology Board of Trustees. He also served on the editorial boards of Archives of Ophthalmology, American Journal of Ophthalmology, Investigative Ophthalmology and Visual Science, and Survey of Ophthalmology and as an examiner for the American Board of Ophthalmology.

Respected for his extensive knowledge of ophthalmology, Dr O'Connor was also regarded with great affection for his dedication to the welfare and accomplishments of his many students. His lectures were meticulous and well referenced; he set a high standard for all of his fellows and residents but was never threatening. His method of instruction was to question, cajole, and expect nothing but the best from all of his students. He had a very engaged approach to teaching, mentorship, and research and involved himself directly in the laboratory projects of his students. He maintained a keen interest in the activities of his graduates, often attending their lectures and conferences, even after his retirement, to show his support.

Dr O'Connor was the embodiment of the gentleman and scholar. He was gracious, warm, and intellectually engaging. He was known for his fastidious use of the English language and the remarkable precision with which he mastered the grammar, syntax, and pronunciation of several other languages. He notably delivered a complete lecture in Japanese (which he had translated phonetically) while visiting Japan.

Dr O'Connor also had a life-long interest in ancient history and archeology, based in part on his own family history. His great-great-great grandfather Johann Heinrich Voss wrote the German translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, which were used by the distinguished 19th-century German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann before his excavations in present-day Turkey, which confirmed the existence of Homer's Troy. Dr O'Connor had always wanted to be involved in a similar project, and after his retirement, he spent many summers digging with his team on the Greek island of Ithaca, searching for the mythic home of Odysseus. With his encyclopedic understanding of Homer and the Greek myths, Dr O'Connor believed that Homer’s Iliad provided the key to locating this ancient site.

Dr O'Connor is survived by his brother Robert and nieces Diane and Susan O'Connor who currently reside in Cincinnati, Ohio, his nephew David O'Connor of Appleton, Wisconsin, and his life partner Willem N. Beringer of Sausalito, California. He is deeply missed by his colleagues at the Proctor Foundation and the University of California at San Francisco and by his students and friends around the globe.

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