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Dr. Wilburt C. Davison, 1892-1972

A Long Career Comes To An End

The man who came south from Baltimore 45 years ago to oversee the building of the Duke University Medical Center, and then guided its course to international prominence over the next three decades, died here last Monday.

Dr. Wilburt Cornell Davison died at 10:45 a.m. in the hospital he saw built. He was 80 in April.

Dr. Davison was dean of the School of Medicine from 1927 until his retirement in 1960, and from 1927-54 he also served as chairman of the Department of Pediatrics. Since his retirement he had made his home at Roaring Gap where he maintained a part-time practice. He also traveled extensively to fulfill other professional commitments.

In failing health over recent years Dr. Davison was admitted to Duke Hospital the last time May 12.

He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Atala Davison, who, like her husband, is an M.D. and a pediatrician; a daughter, Dr. Jeana Davison Levinthal, a pediatrician in Petaluma, Calif.; and two sons, Alexander (Sandy) Davison, a forester in Hillsborough, and Dr. William T. Davison, an orthopaedic surgeon in Port Huron, Mich.

The family scheduled no memorial service. Anyone wishing to make contributions to Dr. Davison's memory may do so to the Davison Memorial Fund, in care of the office of the Vice President for Health Affairs here.

It was 1926 when Dr. William Preston Few, president of the new Duke University which was just being built, began seeking a man to take charge of developing a Duke School of Medicine, School of Nursing and a hospital.

The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was at that time considered to be the major training institution for physicians and medical educators in this



country, and it was to Hopkins that Few turned in his search.

Dr. Davison was assistant dean at Hopkins and was only 34 at the time, but already he had impressed his seniors on both sides of the Atlantic.

A native of Grand Rapids, Mich., and son of a Methodist minister, he earned an A.B. degree at Princeton in 1913 and then went on to Oxford University in England as a Rhodes Scholar.

It was there that he came under the life-long influence of Sir William Osler, dean of the medical school, who branded Davison "a new American colt who is wrecking a medical school tradition" because the young man requested permission to complete his first two years of medical training in one year.

Dr. Davison earned B.A. and B.Sc. degrees at Oxford, then returned to Hopkins for his M.D.

When President Few contacted the people at Hopkins about candidates for the medical deanship at Duke, Dr. William H. Welch, eminent Hopkins

pathologist, told Davison's boss, Dean Lewis H. Weed, that "Davison would be the best man for Dr. Few to secure to develop the school."

After the briefest of interviews, Few and Davison came to an agreement. On Jan. 21, 1927, the University Board of Trustees elected him dean.

The Duke Medical Center was only an idea when Dr. Davison moved to Durham, and in the next few years no detail of its construction was too small for his concern. He was never without his tape measure or yardstick, and was known to even pull on overalls and join the labor crew to give a hand as well as direct.

Informality marked his personality. Dr. Jay M. Arena, one of his earliest students and who remained one of his closest friends, expressed that "the secret of his greatness and his success was that he was many things to many men. Never pretentious, he could and did reach people at any level."

Dr. Eugene A. Stead, who served as chairman of medicine under Dr. Davison, has recalled that "he did not depend on props for dignity. Coatless and tieless, he was always the Duke Medical School. He believed that no rules should ever be written down if it were possible to avoid it. Why limit the future by the vision of the past?"

Dr. Stead also wrote once that "The Duke University Medical School is Dr. Davison's school. He was there before the buildings were built, before the books were bought for the library, before an administrative staff was assembled, and before a single faculty appointment was considered. On all our walls under the paint, one finds inscribed, 'Davison was here.'"

Dr. Barnes Woodhall, who succeeded Dr. Davison as dean in 1960, termed him

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