IN MEMORIUM

A Tribute to David B. Skinner, M.D.

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Dr. David B. Skinner, dear friend, colleague and mentor to so many in the surgical community, died in New York on January 24, 2003, one day after suffering a massive cerebral hemorrhage. He was 67 years old. Dr. Skinner served as a role model for academic surgeons, demonstrating the balance and commitment needed to achieve excellence in research, teaching and clinical surgery while maintaining the values of family and community. His leadership in restructuring the nation’s largest academic healthcare delivery system will have a lasting impact on improving healthcare in this country.

David Bernt Skinner was born on April 28, 1935 in Joliet, Illinois and grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa where he graduated from high school in 1952. He had a photographic memory and always excelled in everything he did. He obtained his BA degree with high distinction from the University of Rochester in New York in 1956, graduating second in his class. His wisest decision was to marry the number one student in his class, May Elinor (Ellie) Tischer who remained his closest friend and advisor throughout his life. Dave and Ellie were married for 46 years and have 4 lovely daughters, Linda, Kristin, Carise, and Margaret.

Following college, David attended Yale medical school, was elected to AOA and graduated in 3 years with the highest grade in the School of Medicine. He trained in General and Thoracic surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and in 1965 served as Chief Resident and Teaching Fellow at the Harvard Medical School where he was known as the “King of the East”. In 1963, while serving as Senior Registrar in Thoracic and Cardiac Surgery under Mr. Ronald Belsey at the Frenchay Hospital in Bristol, England, Dr. Skinner laid the foundation for his lifelong interest in diseases of the esophagus, which was the major focus of his clinical and scientific work. After completing his surgical training, he spent two years in the Air Force teaching hospital in San Antonio, Texas, where he developed a new cardiac assist device. In 1968 Dr. Skinner joined the faculty of the Johns Hopkins Medical School and applied his skills as a surgeon, scientist and teacher. He had a meteoric career as a young faculty member, rising from the rank of Assistant to full Professor at Johns Hopkins in only 4 years. In 1972 he was recruited to Chicago as the Dallas B. Phemister Professor and Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Chicago at the age of 37.

In Chicago, Dr. Skinner was charged with the task of restoring the academic and clinical stature of the University surgery program. He embarked on an ambitious plan to rebuild the department of surgery and achieve excellence in clinical surgery, research and teaching. He wasted no time in recruiting a bright young faculty and rejuvenating the residency training program. In short order he built a new building for the Department of Surgery, with operating rooms, research laboratories and offices, in a single environment, thus providing the ideal structure for simultaneous clinical and academic productivity. He
inspired students, residents and researchers to pursue surgery, mentoring and guiding them in their career development, such that 14 have become chairs of surgical departments in the United States and many more lead specialty areas in this country and abroad. Dr. Skinner measured his own success by the success of his faculty and students. He led by example and always had time to give guidance and counsel whenever needed. Dr. Skinner’s influence on the evolution of American surgery and the development of academic health care systems will endure through the people he has trained.

In 1987, after 15 years of leading the Department of Surgery at the University of Chicago to a position of prominence in American surgery, Dr. Skinner accepted a new challenge in New York as President and CEO of the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. This venerable NY medical center was suffering huge operating deficits due to radical changes in reimbursement rates. When Dr. Skinner arrived at the hospital, he estimated it was losing $1 million a week. Dr. Skinner guided a successful strategy to reverse the staggering losses by cost cutting measures, reductions in hospital length of stay and improvements in efficiency, thereby returning the hospital to profitability. At the same time he greatly improved the morale of the work force by meeting directly with each shift of the hospital staff to address their concerns. He then began a strategic initiative to create New York City’s first major ‘network’ of health care institutions, which would be better able to meet the growing economic challenges from managed health care and declining reimbursements. He further undertook the challenge of replacing the aging New York Hospital patient tower with a new state of the art hospital to be built on a massive platform over the East Side FDR Drive. The 850,000 square foot Greenberg Pavilion opened in 1997. The same year, Dr. Skinner presided over the merger of the New York Hospital with the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital to form the largest academic medical center in the country. Dr. Skinner served as vice chairman, CEO, and President of the New York Presbyterian Hospital and the New York Presbyterian Healthcare System, a network comprised of more than 32 hospitals and health care institutions with combined annual revenues exceeding $2.5 billion. As one of the foremost leaders in American healthcare, Dr. Skinner devoted his efforts to preserve and protect the academic health center for the benefit of patient care, teaching and research.

Throughout his distinguished career, and despite his administrative demands, Dr. Skinner maintained an active surgical practice, and continued to teach surgical skills to residents. He attracted the most challenging esophageal cases with complex clinical problems and handled them with ease. His kindness and caring as a physician remained foremost, even as he became more involved with the executive functions of medicine.

Dr. Skinner’s scholarly achievements include more than 200 peer reviewed scientific publications, more than 150 books and book chapters, and more than 60 visiting professorships nationally and internationally. He was the longstanding Editor of the Journal of Surgical Research and served on numerous editorial boards, including the Annals of Surgery. He served as President of the Society of University Surgeons, Society of Surgical Chairmen and Society of Clinical Surgery and was a member of the President’s Biomedical Research panel and the Institute of Medicine, of the National Academy of Sciences. He received honorary degrees from the University of Rochester, the University of Lund, Sweden and the Technical University of Munich, Germany and was awarded the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art and the National Order of Merit (Chevalier) from France.

However, professional accomplishments did not cloud Dr. Skinner’s perspective on the importance of life outside of the hospital. He cherished family, heritage, culture, art, music, religion and history. Ellie Skinner shared his vision and supported his interests and enthusiasm. The Skinners were patrons of the arts and music and David served as deacon in their church. Ellie opened their home to countless students, researchers, residents, faculty and visitors from throughout
the world and was tireless in her support. A dinner at the Skinners’ was a memorable occasion and the annual Holiday party at the Skinners’ lasted two days. David was devoted to his family and he was most proud of his four daughters and four grandchildren. Three of his daughters are surgeons - Dr. Linda Callans, a general surgeon in Pennsylvania, Dr. Kristin Skinner, a surgical oncologist in New York and Dr. Margaret Skinner, an ENT surgery resident in South Carolina - and one daughter, Carise Rowley, is a guiding light in theater production, and now lives in Idaho. David loved to play tennis and golf with his family and friends and host barbeques at the family summer home in Michigan. His support of New York City firefighters earned him an appointment by the NYFD as Honorary Fire Chief. He delighted in displaying his Chief’s badge and fire helmet and sometimes listened to fire calls on the radio, hoping they would not come when he set off the fireworks on the 4th of July.

In 1987, as he was departing his position as Chairman of Surgery, Dr. Skinner’s grateful faculty at the University of Chicago held a scientific symposium to honor his achievements. At that symposium, Dr. Skinner reflected on his decisions to move to Chicago and then to New York and gave some advice to aspiring faculty, residents and students.

He said: “If you are thinking about what to do next, it is very important to identify and focus on your goals and to dream a bit. If you can’t get excited about your dream, then you shouldn’t try to do it. I was excited by the dream that the University of Chicago could become a preeminent center of excellence with equal balance in the components of research, clinical effort and teaching. It was clear that I could not do this alone, and would have to invoke the interest and enthusiasm of those with whom I was going to work. You must get others to share the dream.”

He went on to say: “As I leave Chicago to take on a new challenge and to live a new dream in New York—I find that the dream is the same—to create a preeminent center of excellence. Only in New York the complexity of the task will be multiplied by a factor of 10.”

This, no doubt, was true, but Dr. Skinner was up to the challenge and as with everything in his life, he achieved his dream and made it look simple. Dr. Skinner shared his dream of excellence with many colleagues throughout the world and inspired many to greatness. Those who were touched by Dr. Skinner continue to share his dream and will carry his legacy into the future.