Asa J Wilbourn, MD (1938-2007)

Asa J Wilbourn, MD, died on February 6, 2007, at the age of 68 years, after a 1 1/2-year struggle with leukemia. Asa was an international leader in the areas of the clinical practice of electrodiagnostic medicine. His numerous publications, book chapters, and lectures provided a systematic approach to the assessment of neuromuscular disease in the electromyography (EMG) laboratory.

He was born and raised in Cairo, Illinois, a small town at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Asa was educated at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. He received his medical degree from Northwestern University and completed a medical internship at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas. Following his internship, Asa enlisted in the air force and served for 2 1/2 years during the Vietnam War. After his military service, Asa resumed his medical training and completed a neurology residency at Yale University. Asa then pursued postgraduate training at the Mayo Clinic, where he completed an electroencephalography fellowship under the direction of Donald Klass, MD, and an EMG fellowship under the direction of Edward Lambert, MD. He then moved to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1973. There, he established the EMG laboratory at the Cleveland Clinic, where he worked until his death.

Asa had a productive professional life, illustrated by more than 200 articles and book chapters, innumerable presentations at national neurology meetings, and countless continuing medical education course presentations. Asa was very involved in the American Association of Electrodiagnostic Medicine (since renamed the American Association of Neuromuscular and Electrodiagnostic Medicine). He served on the board of directors of the organization and participated in nearly all phases of the organization’s activities, including working on various committees, serving as faculty for courses and lectures, and presenting numerous papers at the annual meetings. For his outstanding service, the American Association of Neuromuscular and Electrodiagnostic Medicine awarded Asa the Distinguished Physician Award in 2000 and, later, its most prestigious honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006. Asa also served as president of the American Board of Electrodiagnostic Medicine from 1999 to 2003.

All who had the privilege to work or train with Asa recognized his love of electrodiagnostic medicine and his high standards of clinical practice. He trained many techni- cians in the art and science of nerve conduction studies and organized a highly efficient and productive EMG laboratory. Asa was a passionate and beloved teacher of neurology residents and EMG fellows and was viewed as a personal mentor by the more than 60 fellows he trained during his career. Many of his fellows became close friends and colleagues, sharing challenging cases, collaborative research, and other interests, including politics, sports, animal rights, and World War II history.

Asa’s enthusiasm and passion for electrodiagnostic medicine was infectious and motivated many of the residents who rotated through the EMG laboratory to pursue fellowship training in this field. His devotion to teaching was rewarded in many ways, but he was most proud of the Teacher of the Year award he received from the residents as recognition of his exceptional teaching skills.

Despite his many accomplishments, Asa was extremely humble, never personalizing his achievements. It was not until after his death that most of us in Asa’s professional life learned the full scope of his accomplishments in the US Air Force. He enlisted in 1966 within 2 weeks of completing his medical internship. His dream of becoming a flight surgeon was nearly unfulfilled because of color blindness. To pass the required examination, Asa memorized the numbers on the Ishihara color plates by the orientation of the dots and barely passed. During his 2 1/2 years of service stationed at Da Nang Air Force Base in Vietnam, Asa became one of the most highly decorated flight surgeons in the history of the air force. He was awarded 2 Distinguished Flying Crosses for valor in combat (an award second only to the Congressional Medal of Honor for military service). In addition, he was awarded the Airman’s Medal for valor in noncombat, the Bronze Star Medal, 9 Air Medals, the Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Flight Surgeon of the Year Award. Asa was proud of his military service and would often share stories of his many adventures in the military. However, his modesty never permitted him to divulge his heroic actions that resulted in his many medals and honors.

Asa worked to try to right injustices that came to his attention. In the 1990s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation approached Asa to help in an inspection of EMG fraud. As a result of many hours of work, for which he refused any compensation, 22 criminal practitioners were ultimately convicted. For these efforts, the Federal Bureau of Investigation recognized Asa’s contribution with...
a Certificate for Exceptional Service in the Public Interest. It was his interest in neurogenic thoracic outlet syndrome that led him to his long-term interest in the brachial plexus and to his work to discredit the misuse of electrodiagnostic techniques in the misdiagnosis of thoracic outlet syndrome for the purpose of inappropriate surgical interventions.

In his personal life, Asa and his wife Eileen had a strong commitment to animal rights. Asa’s house was a refuge for abandoned cats and dogs found on the streets. He and Eileen would nurse these animals back to health and often adopt them as pets. He was active in local organizations devoted to the protection and care of abandoned animals.

Asa had a dry, ribald sense of humor. Laughter was often heard erupting from the EMG laboratory’s workspace. Humorous but mildly scandalous drawings had adorned the laboratory’s walls.

Asa Wilbourn has taught a generation of physicians the art and science of electrodiagnosis. As important, he has shown by example how to protect our patients by basing our work on personal integrity and honesty.

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New Initiatives: Clinical Trials and Videos

We have embarked on 2 new initiatives: Clinical Trials and video presentations. We welcome manuscripts that describe double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trials as our primary area of interest. Open-label studies will also receive our special attention. We plan on expediting the review process and time to publication and to include them online ahead of print as these studies are time sensitive and of direct benefit to our patients. We hope you will take advantage of this new initiative. Please refer to the Instructions for Authors when submitting a Clinical Trials paper, including the requirement to register the trial with an accepted clinical trials site.

We plan to utilize videos as part of published papers that highlight and provide convincing information about the observational and visual features of a patient’s neurologic findings. Please refer to Instructions for Authors for instructions on submitting video presentations.