Charles G. Drake (1920-1998)

One of the giants of neurological surgery has left us. Although he will always be identified with taking posterior fossa aneurysm surgery from the realm of the daring to the domain of the routine, his contributions were much broader. He realized early on that there was synergy in bringing neurology, neurosurgery, and all the disciplines dealing with the brain under one roof. He did this with his colleague, Henry J. M. Barnett, by becoming the first chairman of the Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, in 1969. They put London on the international map through recruitment of individuals who have excelled in fields beyond those of the founding fathers.

Charles George Drake was born without a father in Windsor, Ontario, his progenitor having died 2 months before his birth during the Spanish influenza epidemic. Drake was raised by his mother until the age of 9 years and then, after she remarried, by his father’s 2 sisters. At the age of 18 years, he entered the University of Western Ontario to study medicine and graduated in 1944. He was a junior rotating intern at the Toronto General Hospital in 1944 and 1945, then returned to Western, completing an MS degree in neurophysiology. He spent a year with John Fulton at the Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Conn, where he studied the motor physiology of the anterior cerebellum. After 2 years of surgical training at Victoria Hospital in London, Ontario, he went to Toronto General Hospital, where Kenneth McKenzie, Canada’s first full-time neurosurgeon, encouraged him to perform the first elective intracerebral operation on a ruptured aneurysm.

Subsequently, Drake visited the greats in neurology and neurosurgery in Europe, including Sir Hugh Cairns in Oxford, England. In 1952, he returned to London, Ontario, where he became the first neurosurgeon in the region. Little by little, his interest in aneurysms prevailed. In 1958, no one in the world except Drake would touch a ruptured basilar aneurysm, and even he lost 4 of his first 5 patients. The daunting odds of operating on these aneurysms were overshadowed by the abysmal prognosis that would result if they were not treated at all. Drake persisted, learning from every case. He recognized the need for a multidisciplinary approach and worked closely with Ronald F. Aitken, an innovative neuro-anesthesiologist, and with John M. Alcock, a skilled neuroradiologist. Soon Drake became the world’s foremost aneurysm neurosurgeon, operating on a wide range of patients, from television star Della Reese to a child who was sent to him for treatment by Mother Theresa.


Drake combined the highest professional standards with uncommon modesty, stressing his errors as lessons rather than his triumphs. He fished, hunted, and flew his own airplane. He golfed with characteristic intensity and excellence, scoring 3 holes-in-one in his lifetime. Charlie enjoyed tireless support from his beloved wife, Ruthie. Together they had 4 sons and 14 grandchildren.

He had a special interest in young people and showed keen curiosity about all brain disciplines. He came to the weekly clinical neurosciences rounds faithfully and could always be counted on to ask the question that everyone wanted to ask but did not dare. The department’s annual research day for residents, fellows, graduates, and postdoctoral students has been named after him, and a research prize has been instituted to honor his interest in the careers of young people. He had such a powerful, benevolent, and pervasive personality that his presence is only slightly diminished by his physical absence.

Vladimir Hachinski, MD, FRCPC, DSc
Richard & Beryl Ivey Professor and Chair
Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences
University of Western Ontario
London