John N. Whitaker, MD (1940-2001)

John N. Whitaker, MD, died August 29, 2001, in Birmingham, Ala, from injuries suffered during a bicycle race in Tennessee on August 25, 2001. Dr Whitaker was a professor and the chair of the Department of Neurology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Health Services Foundation. Neurology has lost a great leader, clinician, teacher, and investigator. He possessed that rare blend and balance of intelligence and intuitive thinking, with qualities of generosity and thoughtfulness. His gentlemanly and kindly demeanor were admired and appreciated by all.

Dr Whitaker received his undergraduate degree (magna cum laude) from Hendrix College (Conway, Ark) and his medical degree from the University of Tennessee College of Medicine (Memphis) in 1965. Following a medical internship at City of Memphis Hospitals, he obtained neurology training at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, finishing in June 1970. He then served as a clinical associate in the Medical Neurology Branch at the National Institutes of Health (Bethesda, Md) before joining the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis) as an assistant professor. He was on the neurology staff of the University of Tennessee in Memphis from 1973 to 1985 and served as chairman of the Department of Neurology at that institution from 1983 to 1985. Since 1985, he served as professor and chair of the Department of Neurology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. There he also had appointments in the Department of Cell Biology and Physiology and the Department of Biophysics.

His honors include membership in Alpha Omega Alpha, selection as a clinical investigator, a medical investigator in the Veterans Administration, and recipient of a Javits Neuroscience Investigator Award. He was also given the Outstanding Alumnus of the Year Award by the University of Tennessee College of Medical Alumni Association in October of 2000.

His service and organizations include being president of the American Neurological Association (1995-1997), chair of the medical advisory board of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society (1994-1997), and a member of the editorial boards of Archives of Neurology, Annals of Neurology, Muscle and Nerve, Journal of Immunology, Journal of Neuroimmunology, Journal of Neurological Sciences, Multiple Sclerosis, and Neurobase. He was associate editor for the “Controversies in Neurology” section of the Archives of Neurology since 2000.

He has received research support from the National Institutes of Health, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and the Veterans Administration. He was the principal investigator of 3 phase 3 trials of agents for multiple sclerosis and was involved with many clinical programs dealing with the optimal care of patients with multiple sclerosis. He published more than 250 original papers, chapters, and reviews characterizing the clinical, cellular, and biochemical features of human demyelinating diseases.

“John was one of those rare people who was able to balance all the duties required of an internationally known researcher, a deeply caring physician, a dedicated teacher, and a keen administrator,” said Dr William Deal, vice president and dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

“Dr Whitaker was a major figure in American medicine. This is a real loss. The passion with which he cared for his patients, research and students was one of the traits that I most admired. I will also miss his subtle sense of humor and joy of all things academic,” said Pres W. Ann Reynolds of the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Dr Whitaker is survived by his wife, Elaine; his 3 children, Jeff, Amy, and Stacey, together with his son Jeff’s wife, Alexi; and his sister, Beverly Long.

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