Dr. Joseph E. Murray (1919–2012): A Life of Curiosity, Humanism, and Persistence

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About this time two years ago, Dr. Murray phoned to let me know that Ron Herrick, the first kidney donor, had passed. “How do you envision recognizing Ron’s contributions?” was the question posed to me, and there was no doubt in Dr. Murray’s mind that we were to be with the Herrick family at Ron’s memorial service.

Provided with lunch by his ever-present assistant Nancy, a cooler placed between Dr. Murray and his wife Bobby, both sitting in the rear of the car, we were on our way to rural Maine. Escorted by Ginny, the oldest of the six Murray children who had also been close to the Herricks, we arrived four hours later. Although the event was sad, Cynthia, Ron’s widow, and the extended Herrick family gave us a warm welcome. We were part of the Herrick family, and the memorial service could not have taken place without Dr. Murray. I was astounded seeing generations of Herricks all looking like Ron and Richard, my heroes, whose photograph decorates my office wall. Dr. Murray’s work, I came to realize, not only saved the life of his patients, but also made the life of generations to come possible (1).

Dr. Murray was more than a pioneering transplant surgeon. He remained curious throughout his life, and his work was driven by a most humanitarian approach. His patients became part of the Murray family.

In the pre–information technology time, transplant patients were recorded in the “Transplant Master File,” a leather binder starting with the Herrick twins and ending with recordings of those who were transplanted at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in the early eighties.

During the last few years, I would frequently drive from Boston to Wellesley to visit Dr. Murray, and on the way, my thoughts often drifted back over 50 years, imagining how it must have felt for Dr. Murray taking the same route in 1954 to perform the surgery that would make history. Always welcomed and greeted at his house with a big smile, we would sit down in his study and go through pages of the “Transplant Master File,” which I keep as a treasure in my office. Dr. Murray had a story to tell about every patient, all close to him, and not infrequently he would fetch recent letters from his patients out of his many drawers and bookshelves (2).

The Nightingale twins, transplanted in 1960 when Johanna and Lana were 12 years old, and who are still the longest surviving donor and recipient, visited from Canada in 2010 to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary. This celebration, another “family affair” (3), could not have happened without the pioneering work of the—at that time—91-year-old Nobel laureate.

Dr. Murray’s gentle, friendly, personable and approachable demeanor made him a role model for all of us privileged to know him. We—his colleagues, students, and beneficiaries of his groundbreaking work—cherished every moment we had with him. Honoring his work, we celebrate an annual Joseph E. Murray Visiting Professorship in Transplant Surgery, the highlight of our academic year, inviting pioneers and key contributors in the field. The most recent event was held in early November 2012, only two weeks prior to his passing, a special occasion that we all enjoyed greatly.

Dr. Murray received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1990, one of the few Nobel awards given for clinical and, in particular, surgical milestones. Dr. Murray received this award for three achievements, all critical for development in organ transplantation. He performed the first successful organ transplant between the Herrick twins in 1954 (4). A painting of this event, later commissioned by Drs. Moore, Vandam, and Murray, has now found its appropriate place at Harvard’s Francis A. Countway Library (Figure 1), just next to Robert Cutler Hinckley’s painting, “The first operation with Ether” (5).

In 1959, Dr. Murray performed the first allogeneic, non-identical twin transplant (6). The recipient, John Riteris, had been treated with total body irradiation and continued to live for another 28 years. A most beautiful and moving poem by John Riteris, written nine months after the transplant, is again a testament to the far-reaching consequences of Dr. Murray’s work (7).

Dr. Murray also performed the first deceased donor transplant procured from a donor after cardiac death in 1962. The recipient, Mel Ducette, had been successfully treated with chemical immunosuppression. The New England Journal of Medicine publication in
In the seventies, Dr. Murray decided to concentrate on his other professional passion, plastic surgery. He built one of the most highly reputed and recognized plastic surgery divisions worldwide. His skillful surgical, technical and clinical skills and his passionate patient care set another model example in the field of plastic surgery.

Dr. Murray celebrated a wonderful Thanksgiving in 2012, with his large and very tight-knit family, after which a cerebral hemorrhage struck him. When he died on November 26, 2012, at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital at the age of 93, he was surrounded by his devoted family.

His lifelong curiosity, gentle persistence, continuous availability, optimism and smiling face will be with us and guide us in moving organ transplantation forward. Just like the smile on the faces of Thelma and Louise, if you may recall the last scene of the movie, Dr. Murray’s overriding optimism would have asked us to concentrate on the beautiful scenery when driving over the cliff.

The term “Greater than Life” may frequently be used too liberally. Exceptions apply, and without any doubt, the term seems to have been created for Dr. Murray.

As we are continuing our work in medicine and organ transplantation with the goal to improve the life of our patients and to find better treatments, we could not have asked for a better role model to guide our future.

Dr. Murray is survived by his wonderful wife Virginia “Bobby” Murray; his children Ginny, Meg, J. Link, Kathy, Tom and Rick; 18 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren.

References