

In Memorium

A Man to be Remembered Bennett A. Mitchell (1923-2002)

Paul R. Cappola



I recently came upon a booklet published several decades ago by the former Shiley Corporation (now Sorin Biomedical) called "Pioneers in Cardiopulmonary Perfusion." It was distributed at a testimonial dinner in the early 1980's, during which time the Shiley Corporation honored nine members of the perfusion community. These special individuals were recognized as pioneers in the newly developing specialty of extracorporeal technology and cardiac medicine. They included: Richard A. Beauchamp, Edward C. Berger, Jerry L. Dobbs, LeRoy H. Ferries, Angelo Latridis, **Bennett A. Mitchell**, Charles C. Reed, Jerry W. Richmond, and Raymond C. Stofer.

The opening paragraph of that publication is "Shiley is honored to host an evening for a prestigious group of perfusionists who are being recognized tonight for their early contributions, which have brought excellence to the field of cardiovascular perfusion. Their pioneering efforts have had such a profound effect on the advancement of cardiopulmonary perfusion, and they have paved the road for still further advancement by their successors." The booklet goes on to briefly describe each of the nine pioneers in perfusion with photographs, abridged personal histories, and descriptions of their outstanding accomplishments.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to write a few words in tribute to one of those great past pioneers, my dear friend and colleague, **Bennett A. Mitchell**. To me, Ben always exemplified what it means to be a true pioneer of perfusion. As noted in the Shiley Corporation testimonial brochure, Ben is well known for his many outstanding accomplishments in cardiovascular perfusion, his assistance in 1955 in a milestone case where cross circulation perfusion was performed on a child, using the patient's mother as a human oxygenator. He also performed hypothermia perfusion for atrial septal defects using the atrial wall, modified and built the first heart lung machine used in experimental surgery, and operated the heart lung machine used on the first clinical open heart surgery procedure performed at Cornell Medical Center in 1956 in New

York City. Ben operated many of the early oxygenators and heart lung machines at Cornell Medical Center, including the Lillehei-Dewald, Helix Bubbler, Mayo-Gibbon, and Waters Membrane oxygenators, and even built his own experimental "Mitchell" oxygenator. Ben was a role model for our profession. He had the attributes that make a person successful in any profession: he had great empathy for others and a tremendous capacity for management of stressful situations.

Born in the Port of Spain, Trinidad, West Indies, Ben received Bachelors and Masters degrees from Fordham University in New York. He was a scholar who participated in the ground-breaking work that helped perfusion and open heart surgery to become available to those in need in the 1950's. Ben continually searched for ways to improve outcomes from his clinical and research endeavors. As a result of his surgical team's open generosity, he spent a great deal of his time traveling the world lecturing and instructing other health care providers. He was truly a global leader in the perfusion community, inviting students, foreign researchers, and clinicians to visit New York City to observe and learn about the new technology. As time passed and Ben's worldwide influence spread, many of his colleagues and associates began referring to him as "the walking encyclopedia of extracorporeal circulation."

The dignity that was innate in Ben, he shared with others. It was Ben that originally stated, coined, and promoted the name "perfusionist." He was frequently invited as an honored guest at European symposiums and was as highly regarded by members of international perfusion societies as he was in the United States. At the invitation of the American Society of Extra-corporeal Technology (AmSECT) Ben was happy to volunteer his time on their "continuing education" projects and authored several society modules. For example, his discourse on "Profound Hypothermia with Circulatory Arrest and Acid-Base Balance" or "Mechanical Support of the Failing Lungs and Right Heart" are inspiring overview references. Ben al-

ways wished to continue to share his knowledge and experience with others.

I am sure I speak for many in the profession when I say, "I have many fond memories of times we spent together including covering for each other during several marathon per diem open heart cases in the New York City metropolitan area, as well as attending the Sixth European Congress on Extra-Corporeal Circulation Technology in Waterloo, Belgium, as honorary guests of the Foundation European Congress on Extra-Corporeal Circulation Technology (FECECT)." Ben was always delighted to partake in FECECT sponsored proceedings. During that Congress week, I came to realize the scope of the worldwide respect bestowed upon my associate, **Bennett A. Mitchell**; he was treated like a head of state, being greeted with great admiration by world wide delegates from countries from all over the globe including, but not limited to, China, Brazil, Russia, Czech Republic, Iceland, and Sweden. He had visited most of these delegates in their native lands to tutor them in the new technology.

Ben personally felt that his greatest accomplishment was when he received the prestigious Gibbon Award. I was fortunate to share his gratification, when AmSECT asked me to introduce Ben as their 1995 Gibbon Award recipient. This tribute is the Society's most prestigious award and has traditionally been presented to surgeons and historically given to but a few perfusionists, (such as James P. Dearing and LeRoy H. Ferries). Even in his latter years, Ben worked to share his knowledge and experience with others as he continued to seek out a publisher for his most recent work, an original pediatric text book entitled, "Heart Disease in Children, A Comprehensive Overview for Perfusionists." Hopefully this original manuscript may someday get published for our benefit and as a tribute to his life's work.

I will miss Ben on a personal as well as on a professional level, but I know that he will still be with us as one of the true pioneers of perfusion. His accomplishments will con-

tinue to provide us with a rich history and serve as a guide for the future of our profession. His spirit and tireless professional devotion, like that of Dr. John and Mary Gibbon our foremost perfusionists and other great pioneers of the profession, will always serve as an inspiration.

Post Script: There is a Memorial in honor of Ben at <http://perfline.com/index> organized by his dear friend, Maria Helena from Brazil. Below, I have posted several abridged quotes taken from Maria's website. Please visit the site for more information and/or to post a memorial note.

"On behalf of the Portuguese Cardiovascular Perfusion Community I wish to emphasize the contribution of this great man, precursor of the modern extracorporeal circulation and perfusion technology. His memorial stands as an unique reference for us and for future generations." Nuno Raposo—Portugal.

"... You have been not only one of the greatest perfusionist, but also one of the greatest human being—the star on the sky. I hope that the new generation of perfusionists will also miss you as we do..." Ervin Severdija, Senior Clinical Perfusionist, University Hospital Maastricht

Maria Helena L. Souza, CCP (Br)

... This is Melissa, Ben Mitchell's granddaughter. I am writing to inform you that regrettably my grandfather has passed away. He was pronounced dead around 3 am Thursday morning. He died in his home due to natural causes. My family is planning the funeral arrangements. My mother, Marcella asked me to inform his friends and colleagues...

Melissa's short note announced a great loss to the international perfusion community. Ben, as Bennett A. Mitchell was known to friends and relatives, died on July 25, 2002. He was a hard worker from a young age until he could no longer work anymore. He was a wonderful father, husband, son, grandfather, and a friend to everyone he met. He was one of the most caring, intelligent, wise, humorous, independent, nurturing and loving person I knew. He was a great man. He was pure, honest, earnest, zealous, honorable, extraordinary and noble, yet humble and normal. He was an achiever, not for himself but for his mates and for his profession. His love and devotion toward his profession was greater than anything one can possibly compare. He was a true professional and educator.

Ben was universally respected as a brilliant observer with an encyclopedic knowledge of cardiopulmonary perfusion. The most outstanding characteristic of this beloved individual was his capacity for friendships. Always courteous, often with a good story and a hearty laugh, he reached out to everyone, was remarkable in remembering names and facts, and was always available to teach. His friends always knew that when a problem came up they could go to him, and his advice was in the right direction. Ben combined the authority that came from a life of



achievement with a remarkable lack of pretentiousness.

To say that Ben Mitchell had a high-profile career is an understatement. He is well known and profoundly respected worldwide for his enormous contribution to the art of cardiopulmonary bypass, since the early days. He was a member of AmSECT, and the AACP, and several other international organizations.

In 1990 Ben received the AmSECT President's Award for Lifetime Achievement, in grateful recognition for his many services to AmSECT and the perfusion profession.

In 1995 Ben Mitchell was chosen as the recipient of the Gibbon Award for his outstanding service to the extracorporeal circulation technology. Among many contributions Ben stimulated the creation of AmSECT and coined the term "Perfusionist" to replace a host of inadequate denominations, such as pump technician, pump-girls and several others.

Ben has made close friends everywhere where he had been teaching, instructing and lecturing. He was as popular in China, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Spain, and many other countries as he was in his homeland.

Here are a few excerpts from messages regarding Ben's professional life and relationships:

... During the years I always tried to make a stop in New York. Ben and I would spend many hours in the O.R. and intensive care to observe the early use of long-term left-heart bypass. But we also spent time in many cozy and charming restaurants, which only a real New Yorker can find for you. During our many conversations I also became impressed by Ben's photographic memory. From all kind of subjects, he could tell me straight away, in which journal and on which date a concerned article was published. During the days before computers it was my choice to spend many hours in the library to find references on certain subjects or to just call Ben.

Ben was a charming and open-minded person, a man with an exceptional personality and a good sense of humour. All my students and friends, which I brought in contact with him during the years were impressed by his friendliness, charm and hospitality. Probably his only weak point was being too modest for a man of his age and experience, but this also made him special. He loved his profession and shared his knowledge with many colleagues all over the world. Because of his background from Trinidad, he spoke very well Spanish and was therefore also honored in the Spanish speaking countries where he lectured, in America as well as in Europe. Ben always enjoyed going their meetings, but he also stayed in touch with societies in many other countries. He was an invited lecturer at the 10 years anniversary symposium of the Dutch Society on ECC (NeSECC), in Maastricht in 1986, and honored guest on the first European Congress on ECT, sponsored by the FECECT, in Noordwijk in 1991. During the years he continued to attend and to participate

in the European congresses in different capacities, also after his retirement.

Many members of the perfusion community owe him a great deal. He also paid his dues to the society as a soldier, by being one of the many European liberators, during World War II. As a result of this he even suffered a period in a German prison camp and so are there many more stories to tell, about this extraordinary man.

I was sad when I was informed that Ben passed away. He was at an age where one can expect this to happen, but a person like him, will always leave an empty feeling, whatever the age. His departure remembered me of a movie scene, in which a man obviously emotional was standing on a grave. Someone passing by wanted to say something comforting and asked the man, "was the deceased a close relative or family from you", "No", answered the man, "it is much worse, it was a friend" . . .

Dick S. de Jong, CCP—The Netherlands.

... The first perfusionist I met from abroad in Rotterdam was Ben Mitchell. A big dark man with big hands and very friendly. I was preparing a heart-lung machine (which takes some time!). Ben came in at the department, a very small room, and follow with his big brown fingers how the lines where running and the way the extra-corporeal system was set-up. After 2 minutes, the only thing he said to me was, OK! At that time I did not understand much about perfusion and CPB. After a few years Dick convinced and stimulated me about the challenges of the job as a chief clinical perfusionist. He 'sent me away'. Together with 2 surgeons I started a new program in the south of the Netherlands. The Catharina Hospital, Eindhoven. In 1978 we started the programme with 2 cases a week. This year, 2002, we will do about 1600 cases. No problem, because Dick and Ben where always with and behind me and supported me! Without knowing the history...there is no future! I learned a lot from Ben. He was an inspirator. Dick de Jong told me always that Ben is a 'walking library'. After some years, I agree! I also remember the visit of Ben to Holland, in 1985, when he returned from a 6 weeks trip to China. He spent one week in Holland and gave some presentations about his work in Beijing, Shanghai and other places in China. At that time I was chairman of the educational committee of the Dutch Society for Perfusionists, the NeSECC. During this very special meeting, Ben impressed many of the young members of our Society. Most impressive for me was the slide when he was doing the perfusion and many people around him were looking and discussing what he, the great master, was doing. He was acting during the operation like a magician, as they felt and said . . .

John Steenbrink—The Netherlands.

... I was disheartened to hear of his passing. He was one of my heroes in perfusion and I admired him greatly. Not only for his accomplishments as a perfusionist, but for the character he demonstrated in leading our profession. He

was a man of great insight who gave freely of his time and knowledge. I read many of his publications and profited from them immensely. I know they have made me a better clinician. He had a unique gift of making complex problems, understandable. Moreover, his kindness and willingness to help any in need were a touchstone in which I try to mimic.

One of the proudest moments of my career as a perfusionist occurred when Ben received the Gibbon award. I spoke with him at length after the ceremony and his passion for perfusion was readily evident. He told me to stay focused on what was at hand and never waiver from doing

the right thing. I will never forget those words, nor the individual, Ben Mitchell.

Alfred H. Stammers, MSA, CCP—U.S.A.

Many other testimonies on Ben's life and achievements have been written on behalf of perfusion societies and by some of his personal friends and students.

For his service to science, to education, and to the international community of perfusionists, we honor Ben Mitchell's distinguished lifetime and will forever treasure his contributions to our institutions and to our lives. We who have been touched by his wisdom, his energy, and his tireless devotion to our profession will always remember him.