

CHARLES L. WITTE, MD (1935-2003): QUINTESSENTIAL LYMPHOLOGIST AND RELUCTANT SURGEON



Born May 27, 1935 in New York City, Dr. Charles Witte, Editor-in-Chief of *Lymphology* for the past twenty years, died March 7, 2003 after a long illness at University Medical Center on Ward 6 East, surrounded by family, colleagues, and friends. He was a graduate of Columbia College and received an MD from New York University. After an internship at North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill, N.C., he completed a residency in general surgery at Bellevue Hospital in New York. Under the tutelage of renowned surgeons, John H. Mulholland, Allan E. Dumont at NYU and Nathan Womack at the University of North Carolina, Dr. Witte first became interested in the lymphatic circulation and began seminal studies into the pathophysiology of portal hypertension, ascites and bleeding of esophageal varices. After two years in the U.S. Air Force, he joined the faculty at Washington University in St. Louis. When the new medical school opened in Tucson, Arizona, he became a charter

surgical faculty member in 1969 under Dr. Erle E. Peacock, Jr. and practiced abdominal and trauma surgery continuously from that time until a few months before his death.

For the past 43 years, Dr. Witte struggled with disorders of lymph flow both in the peripheral and visceral circulations, including helping to design and simplify methods to evaluate and treat congenital and obstructive lymphedema, lymphangiodysplasia and chylous reflux syndromes. He also pursued the intricacies of the spleen including postsplenectomy sepsis, splenic growth and preservation and examined the transcapillary fluxes of fluid, protein and oxygen to assess microcirculatory hydrodynamics and tissue perfusion in the splanchnic vasculature. In conjunction with Marlys Witte, MD, also Professor of Surgery at The University of Arizona, Dr. Charles Witte established a lymphological laboratory in 1969 devoted to both basic and clinical investigation of lymphatic circulatory disorders and, in 1994, they organized a Comprehensive

Lymphedema-Angiodysplasia Diagnostic and Treatment Center. He also joined with Dr. Marlys Witte and philosopher Ann Kerwin, PhD in developing a Curriculum on Medical Ignorance, a teaching approach that emphasizes questions rather than answers and, as a learning tool, has generated wide interest among elementary, high school, college, and medical educators. Dr. Witte was the author or co-author of more than 400 articles and chapters on a wide variety of medical subjects including peptic ulcer, appendicitis, biliary tract dysfunction, hepatosplenopathies, trauma, pancreatitis, pulmonary fibrosis, regional enteritis, heart failure, fluid and electrolyte imbalance, complications of portal hypertension, filariasis, Kaposi sarcoma, ethanolism, hiatal hernia, gastrointestinal fistulae, spider angiomas, deep venous thrombosis, breast cancer, hydrocele, and chaos. He received international recognition for his landmark studies in lymphology including election to the National Academy of Medicine of Brazil. Additionally, he has been honored as a stimulating and challenging mentor by both medical students and resident physicians and was highly regarded as a general and trauma surgeon.

With characteristically good humor, clear thinking, plain talk, and an incisive writing style, he considered himself a “reluctant” surgeon operating to help his patients and relieve suffering in the face of how much is not known in medicine and remains to be discovered (i.e. medical ignorance). He possessed an insatiable curiosity always urging his students and colleagues to seek better answers and lives for their patients through questioning and research.

Beloved husband and 50-year companion of Dr. Marlys Witte, father of Pamela, Andrea, and Russell, and grandfather of Jake, Cindy, and Lorena – he loved more than he would ever say. His lifelong passion was baseball (he played hardball in the Tucson Adult Men’s Baseball League with the Cincinnati Reds and Doc’s Desperados until 2002), he taught himself to a near-master

level in chess and bridge, enjoyed singing baritone along with the great operatic tenors, and traveled footloose throughout the world. An unabridged 4-hour memorial service, which was a celebration of his life and full of “Witte stories,” is available on streaming video at <http://video.biocom.arizona.edu/video/confererevents/default.htm>. An endowment fund for the Charles L. Witte Professorship in Surgery/University of Arizona Foundation has been established to perpetuate his legacy.



“A sad day for the Lymphological World. Charles Witte passed away — a scientist, a researcher, a gentleman, and over all a friend.”

– **Cristobal M Papendieck,**
ISL President 1999-2001
Buenos Aires, Argentina

“Following an outstanding record as a student at the NYU School of Medicine, Chuck began his surgical career in 1961 under the aegis of Dr. John H. Mulholland, one of this country’s most prominent professors of surgery. In time he became a superb chief resident and one day, in 1965, towards the end of his year as chief, he asked Dr. Mulholland for suggestions about a research project. The planets must have been in a favorable alignment for Dr. Mulholland recommended studies of the lymphatic system then just getting under way in my laboratory. Joined by Marlys who had by then completed her training in internal medicine, the three of us began a collaboration marked by years of endless arguments, repeated revisions of galleys and enduring affection.

Looking back on this effort, it is clear that I had the special privilege of watching Chuck develop as medical student, house officer and mature surgeon and investigator.

It is only a little while since he died and the impress of his genial, earnest and determined personality is fresh in our minds. It is not possible at this time to trace in detail Chuck’s remarkable professional career — nor is it necessary. His academic honors, his extraordinary ability as a surgeon and his reputation as an investigator are well known to this audience. Contributions to our

knowledge of the lymphatic system flowed from the work of Chuck and Marlys in almost endless succession and are known and acknowledged throughout the world. Chuck was at the same time an inspiring and unique teacher, unique because he understood the importance of emphasizing what is still uncertain or unknown. His professional immortality as an academic surgeon and scholar is assured. He was respected, trusted and widely admired. A sense of personal loss will endure.”

- **Allan E. Dumont, ISL President 1979-1983**
Hartford, Connecticut, USA

“I’ve never known how to say goodbye to anyone who mattered — and you matter a lot. I’ve learned more from you than from anyone I’ve ever known in medicine. Because of you, I wake up mornings — well, some mornings, anyway — thinking about Pasteur. But it isn’t just Pasteur, or Osler, or the other people you taught me about; it’s the WAY you talked about them, the curl of your lip, the light in your eye, the tone of your voice, all the intangibles that make you what you are. It’s the fact that you cared, that made me care — it’s the calling or the zeal or the passion that makes all the difference. That’s what makes you a true teacher, Chuck. And you can be sure that what you have taught me will not be lost or forgotten — it will be passed on, all but the intangibles themselves, which are yours and yours alone. Yet even those will last, as a gift from one mind to another, and from you to all of us. That may not be much, but it’s just enough to guarantee immortality. As epitaphs go, that’s not bad; alas, far more than any of us will ever know — or deserve. If there’s a greater reward out there, I hope you get it. It’s an honor to know you — to have walked the earth at the same time as you — and most of all, dear Chuck, to have heard such divine music stirring in the endless rushes of your great soul. Your friend, in this life and every other,”

- **Dennis Rohatyn, Professor of Philosophy**
University of San Diego, California, USA

“I had the hope that I could stay some time more beside him, that I could hear his ideas that have always made me think beyond what was said; that I could remember the flags he gave my son; that I could see his smiling face when he said his “anyhow...”; that I could thank him for all he’s done for me that last 10 years. It’s hard to imagine how such a person, living so far, so different from

you, can play such an important role in the things you do.”

- **Mauro Andrade, ISL President-Elect 2003-2005**
São Paulo, Brazil

“On behalf of all members of the International Society of Lymphology and as president of ISL and personal friend of Charles Witte, I want to express my very deep sadness for this terrible event.

Lymphology has lost one of its most important personalities. As surgeon, searcher and teacher, Charles gathered all the specific qualities which define an authentic lymphologist. His enormous research in lymphatic digestive diseases remains in all the minds, and I personally remember that when I was a young surgeon involved in lymphatic research I considered the publications of Charles Witte as the fundamental stone and the initiation of every research in lymphatic digestive disease. Charles was also an excellent speaker and teacher and for us poor Europeans understanding with difficulty our American colleagues, it was always a pleasure to have a lecture given by Charles. And Charles was an active administrative lymphologist: he was a member of the executive committee of ISL and the spirit of our journal Lymphology, which we proudly offer to the scientific community. Goodbye my friend. Your lymphological soul is marching on.”

- **Alexander Pissas, ISL President 2001-2003**
Bagnols sur Cèze, France

“Very sad news. I lost a great friend. Even if we had different views on some problems, inside we were as one man. I will never forget his friendship which started in the early 70’s. His voice still sounds in my ears. One day we all meet again.”

- **Waldemar Olszewski, ISL President 1989-1991**
Warsaw, Poland

“Michael and I received the news of Chuck’s passing away with great sadness. It is not only a great personal loss, Chuck was both dear friend and close respected colleague for both of us, it is also a tremendous loss to the world of medicine. Charles Witte was a great scientist, an enrichment to the science of Lymphology, the world will be much poorer without him. We held a private ceremony of remembrance here in Hinterzarten, when we learned of Charles’ having departed from us.”

- **Michael Földi, ISL President 1987-1989**
- **Ethel Földi, ISL President 1997-1999**
Hinterzarten, Germany

“The premature death of Chuck will leave a tremendous void in the world of lymphology. He was as much involved with men as with medicine and for that reason he always seemed to me to work slightly further back from the cutting face of discovery in science. I have lost a friend.”

**– Alain Pecking,
ISL Executive Committee Member
St. Cloud, France**

“Facing this so bad and so sad news we have to remember the so marvelous man Charles was. We will keep in mind his high human and scientific quality. Charles Witte did so much for our society. We, all of us, have to thank the lymphologist and the editor. The ISL is still alive certainly because Charles has made so extraordinary efforts to keep the journal at the top level.”

**– Robert V. Cluzan, ISL Treasurer
Paris, France**

“We met each other for the first time in Belgium during the 3rd International Congress of Lymphology, 1970. Since that time I have never failed to see him in each international congress of lymphology. We have always attended the meetings together. Sometimes we had different opinions but usually we have sense in common in the point that we love lymphology. I still remember Tucson when I visited with my wife for the first time to attend the 4th International Congress of Lymphology, 1973. Cactus museum, movie studio and Nogales were very impressive.”

**- Moriya Ohkuma, ISL President 2003-2005
Sakai, Japan**

“The disappearance of our brotherly friend, dearest Chuck, left a huge empty void and the thought not to be able to meet him again and to listen to his learned Lectures and speeches, caused me, Daniela and Francesco, a deep sorrow we can’t describe by words. We are sure that His spirit, His example of a strictly honest man, of Doctor, Surgeon, University Professor and Scientist, and Pioneer of International Lymphology will remain always with us, as indelible in his exemplary life of husband, father and faithful friend. We shall never forget him and his usual and friendly smile as long as we live. Our dear Chuck remains and lives with all people over the world who loved him.”

**– Corradino Campisi, ISL President 1995-1997
Genoa, Italy**

“No one who knew Chuck will ever forget his charm, wit, and unrelenting intellectual approach to everything from science to baseball. Professor Witte spent 34 years gracing our halls and his last days on 6 East, still surrounded by the students, residents, faculty, and administrators, whose affection and respect he enjoyed.”

**– Kenneth J. Ryan, Interim Dean
University of Arizona College of Medicine
Tucson, Arizona, USA**