

IN MEMORIAM

BURTON JAMES LEE III, MD **Lymphologist, Oncologist, Physician to U.S. Presidents** **March 28, 1930 – November 25, 2016**



Fig. 1. Dr. Burton J. Lee, III.
 PHOTO: PUBLISHED IN THE TC PALM,
 11/29/2016.

On November 25, 2016, Burton J Lee III, MD, passed away from complications of bladder cancer, leaving behind his devoted wife of 50 years, Ann, and their six children along with a legacy of major contributions to medical science, cancer care, and public policy. A pioneering lymphologist, Dr. Lee was actively involved as a clinician and researcher during the decades that witnessed the transformation of malignant lymphoma into a set of potentially curable diseases. In his second career, he served as counsel and physician to a succession of US Presidents including Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush, and briefly, Bill Clinton, during which time he expanded the role of White House physician to include public positions on health care policy.

In the 1st and other early International Society of Lymphology (ISL) Congresses, Dr. Lee, while physician at Memorial-Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, participated actively, presenting and subsequently publishing research on refinements in conventional oil contrast lymphography (LAG) – including intraorgan indirect lymphography – and collaborating with lymphographers in consensus development and to categorize and stage the lymphomas – operatively and by LAG – and test improved drug and radiation treatment protocols. As time passed, lymphomas would be staged using other imaging modalities and histologic immunophenotyping for prognosis while powerful chemotherapeutic regimens would be developed for the aggressive non-Hodgkin lymphomas. As Dr. Lee moved into the political and health policy arenas in the late 1980's, he was instrumental in initiating governmental action in the AIDS epidemic, both in support and protection of patients. He also was an early and outspoken critic of government-sponsored abuse and torture particularly against prisoners in the war on terrorism. As personal physician to President George H. Walker Bush, he played the key role in explaining, and not glossing over, the President's minor and more major illnesses to the public. His other patients included the Shah of Iran, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and Boris Yeltsin. My last personal communication with him was in 1993 when the ISL was making plans for his participation in



*Fig. 2. Burton Lee and his wife, Ann, with President Bush in the Oval Office on Dec. 21, 1992.
PHOTO: GEORGE BUSH PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM*

the 14th ICL in Washington, DC. Pressing matters kept him from this reunion with his lymphologist friends and colleagues.

Dr. Lee was born in Manhattan on March 28, 1930, graduated from Phillips Andover Academy and Yale University, and received his MD from Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. He served an internship at Bellevue Hospital in 1956-1957 at a time when lymphology was just beginning to emerge there as a discipline. Following a stint in the US Army, he began a 29 year career as attending then Senior Physician with the Lymphoma Service at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. When his career in Washington, DC ended, he served as hospital administrator in Greenville, South Carolina, where he established the city's first comprehensive cancer treatment program. He subsequently

entered the biotechnology world as a Board member of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, and then retired to Vero Beach, Florida, where he was actively involved until his death in efforts to extend care to the financially needy and alcoholics in recovery.

Extensive obituaries and eulogies (1-3) were published including in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal upon his death followed by numerous online posts by former patients and colleagues that reveal many details of his public and private life and particularly his contributions to cancer care as well as to medical science and health policy. Beloved by his patients for treating them "body and soul," he would perhaps cherish most the tribute from one of his long-time patients on behalf of all of his patients, "[he] became the ultimate friend...grand and superhuman" (3). The international



*Fig. 3. Burton Lee, the physician to President George H.W. Bush, in his White House office in January 1990.
PHOTO: WILLIAM FOLEY/LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES*

community of lymphologists mourns his loss and is grateful for the time he spent with us and his contributions to our current understanding, imaging evaluation, and treatment of lymph/blood cancers.

REFERENCES

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3. Lagnado, L: The Endangered 'Good Doctor'. Wall St. Journal 4/17/17

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