
In memoriam

James C. Thompson, MD, FACS, 1928–2008

by *Marshall J. Orloff, MD, FACS*

James C. Thompson, MD, FACS, one of the leading surgical scientists, educators, and statesmen of the past half-century, died at age 79 in his home in Galveston, TX, on May 9, of prostate cancer. From 1970 to 1995, he was chairman of the department of surgery at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston, where he also served as the Ashbel Smith Professor of Surgery and as professor in the department of physiology and biophysics. He is widely credited with building one of the leading surgical scientific programs in the U.S. and with bringing about a sea change throughout UTMB in education and research.

Jim Thompson was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He grew up in the little cow town of Hebbronville in Jim Hogg County in south Texas, population 3,000. His father owned the town hardware store and died while on a hunting trip on horseback, when Jim was 14 years of age. At best, the economic condition of the family was modest. Jim attended grade school and high school in the single, little Hebbronville public school. In 1944, when he had just turned age 16, he entered the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas,



Dr. Thompson

now Texas A&M University, graduating with a bachelor of science degree in just two years. In 1946, when he had just turned 18 years, he entered medical school at UTMB. His family was dirt-poor and even though the tuition was small, he dropped out after his freshman year to earn sufficient funds to continue his medical education. He worked as a paid laboratory assistant to Dr. Raymond Blount, professor of anatomy, ultimately earning a master's degree in anatomy and endocrinology some years later. He returned to medical school at UTMB in 1948 and went on to serve a rotating internship at

UTMB from 1951 to 1952.

Toward the end of his internship, he applied all over the country for a residency in surgery and was turned down by every institution except one, and that was a fluke. The one program that accepted him tentatively was at the University of Pennsylvania, headed by I. S. Ravdin, MD, FACS, who sent him a telegram that read, "We are of course full, but any descendant of the famous James E. Thompson of Galveston is welcome into my program. We will put you into the Harrison Department of Surgical Research for a year, and then you can come into the clinic." Jim Thompson didn't have a clue as to who James E. Thompson was. In fact, James E. Thompson was the founder many years earlier of the department of surgery at UTMB. It was a clear case of mistaken identity, which Jim Thompson let pass, given his desperate circumstances.

After a year in the research lab, Jim Thompson entered the clinical surgery residency at Penn in 1953 and completed residency in 1959. His training was interrupted during the Korean War by the "doctors draft," which resulted in a two-year stint in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in Germany, where he

achieved a modicum of fame in Army circles. The Army classified him as a physician, general duty, not a surgeon, and assigned him to a small battalion clinic in Munich, where he took daily sick call. In that capacity, he saw soldier after soldier with the unfortunate socially transmitted disease of gonorrhea. The soldiers were very upset by the knowledge that they had gonorrhea, mainly because they feared demotion or even expulsion from the Army. So, kindly, Lt. James Thompson, MD, recorded in the medical record a diagnosis of laryngitis for each of these soldiers with gonorrhea. Army medical headquarters in Washington, DC, was alarmed by the unusual outbreak of laryngitis in Munich and sent a team of senior infectious disease specialists and epidemiologists there to investigate. Needless to say, interrogation of Lieutenant Thompson uncovered the truth of the matter, but the inspectors were so impressed by his kindness and ingenuity that they covered up the reported epidemic of laryngitis.

I first met Jim Thompson late at night in October 1952 in the research laboratories of the Harrison Department of Surgical Research at Penn. We liked each other from the start and we saw each other regularly from then on, and throughout the next 56 years. I recognized his enormous talent and engaging personality, but I do not believe the senior surgical faculty at Penn fully appreciated his potential, a fact that only served to increase his determination to succeed as

an academic surgical scientist. When he completed the surgical residency at Penn, he was shunted off to the old Pennsylvania Hospital, a Penn affiliate, to fend for himself. What he accomplished on his own at the Pennsylvania Hospital from 1959 to 1963 was remarkable and a tribute to his determination, tenacity, and ability. He established a first-rate surgical research laboratory on his own; obtained research grants from major agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, on his own; published paper after paper on gastrointestinal physiology and disease on his own; and attracted the attention of leading gastrointestinal (GI) scientists from the U.S. and abroad, such as Lester Dragstedt, Roderick Gregory, and Morton Grossman.

In 1963, knowing that his talent was not fully appreciated and recognized at Penn, I was able to recruit him to University of California–Los Angeles Harbor General Hospital, where I was chief of surgery. In 1967, he succeeded me as professor and chief of surgery. At Harbor General Hospital, he continued his remarkably productive career as an academic surgical scientist, so much so that in 1970, he was recruited by his alma mater, UTMB, to return as professor and chair of surgery for the next 25 years.

Scientific contributions

The research laboratory that Jim Thompson established was involved continuously in the investigation of basic and applied principles of GI physiology and endocrinology. The numer-

ous original and far-reaching studies undertaken by the Thompson laboratory focused particularly on identification and function of GI hormones in health and disease. The work was made possible by research grants that Jim Thompson obtained continuously for 41 years from the NIH under highly competitive circumstances. The laboratory and clinical research accomplished by the Thompson group resulted in 616 publications in peer-reviewed journals, 120 book chapters, and 588 scientific abstracts in the 54 years from 1953 to 2007, a remarkable record of productivity that few academic surgeons have equaled.

Service to surgery and society

Jim Thompson's record of service to surgery and to society is unsurpassed. He was elected to the presidency of six major national surgical organizations, including the American College of Surgeons, the American Surgical Association, the Southern Surgical Association, the Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract, the Society of Surgical Chairs, and the James IV Association of Surgeons. He also served as president of the Texas Surgical Society and the South Texas Chapter of the American College of Surgeons. He was heavily involved in service to the American College of Surgeons, having served as Chairman of the Committee for the Forum on Fundamental Surgical Problems, a member of the Board of Governors for six years, a member of the Program Committee for 10

years, Chairman of the Surgical Research and Education committee, and a member of the Scholarship Committee. He also served as chairman of the Merit Review Board for Surgery of the U.S. Veterans Administration, a director for six years of the American Board of Surgery, an associate editor of the *Yearbook of Surgery*, and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*.

Contributions to education

Arguably, Jim Thompson's most lasting contributions were in education. He trained 131 research fellows from the U.S. and 18 foreign countries in the fundamentals of scientific research. Along with his faculty colleagues, he trained more than 200 residents in clinical surgery. Twelve of his students advanced to the position of chairman of the department of surgery and/or full professor at major universities. During the course of his career, he was invited 265 times to serve as a visiting professor at universities in the U.S., Europe, the Far East, India, Africa, South America, and Central America. His influence on the education of surgeons was worldwide.

Honors

Among his many honors, the two that he prized most highly were his elections to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences and to the American Philosophical Society. In addition, he was elected to membership in 56 national professional and scientific organizations. Ten foreign surgical

societies selected him as honorary member, and the University of Beijing made him an "honorary professor for life." In 1993, the 44th volume of the *Surgical Forum* was dedicated to Jim, and in 1996 the American College of Surgeons selected him for the Distinguished Service Award. He received a similar award from the National Medical Association and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society of University Surgeons.

Qualities of character and personality

The most important and lasting attributes of a man are the qualities of his character and personality. In regard to Jim Thompson, those qualities were his essence. The first quality was his incredible tenacity and determination. His background is a story of "we shall overcome": He overcame a background of near poverty in a small Texas town; he overcame poverty that forced him to interrupt his medical education; he overcame lack of recognition in his residency at Penn; and he overcame being shunted to a backstream hospital at the start of his academic career. With determination and tenacity and no athletic experience, at the age of 60, he took up snow skiing and gave it up some years later only after he sustained a hip fracture on the slopes. Importantly, as a result of determination, tenacity, and ability, he changed UTMB and built one of the leading surgical scientific programs in the U.S., where nothing like it existed when he arrived in Galveston.

The second Thompson attribute that deserves comment was his unflagging support of the young people in his program and of his coworkers. He learned early in life that the main responsibility of an academic leader is to help and nurture and mentor those under him, and that the accomplishments of the troops ultimately reflect glory, not only on themselves but also on the leader. He strongly believed that their success was his success. During many of our conversations over the years, often with obvious pleasure, he extolled the abilities and virtues of his people. In preparing this memorial tribute, I carefully examined his curriculum vitae. As a reflection of his nurturing—and it is only a sample—of his 616 peer-reviewed publications, Courtney Townsend, MD, FACS, was a co-author in 245; Mark Evers, MD, FACS, in 51; Dan Beauchamp, MD, FACS, in 43; Gerald Fried, MD, FACS, in 15; David Herndon, MD, FACS, in 14; Bill Nealon, MD, FACS, in 12; and Hugo Villar, MD, FACS, in 9. Jim Thompson was and will remain a model of effective leadership.

The third Thompson attribute, and one that few surgeons possess, is in the area of non-medical culture. Jim Thompson was truly a cultured man, with serious interests and knowledge in literature, art, and music. Many of his colleagues considered him to be the most cultured person in the city of Galveston, a most unusual accolade for a surgeon. One had only to visit the large Thompson home on Bayou Shore Drive

to experience striking confirmation of these cultural interests. The walls in every room were lined by bookcases filled with a wide array of books, both non-fiction and fiction. Jim was the most avid reader whom I have known. The walls and ceilings of every room, including the kitchen, were papered with original artwork from all over the world. And the collection of classical and modern music CDs and tapes was staggering. You might ask, "What did these interests have to do with his job as a chair of the department of surgery?" They enhanced his understanding of his patients and of the human condition. Moreover, his cultural interests made him a most interesting colleague and friend—far out of the ordinary.

The fourth attribute that deserves comment is a quality that many find wanting when they face difficult choices (as they say, when the chips are

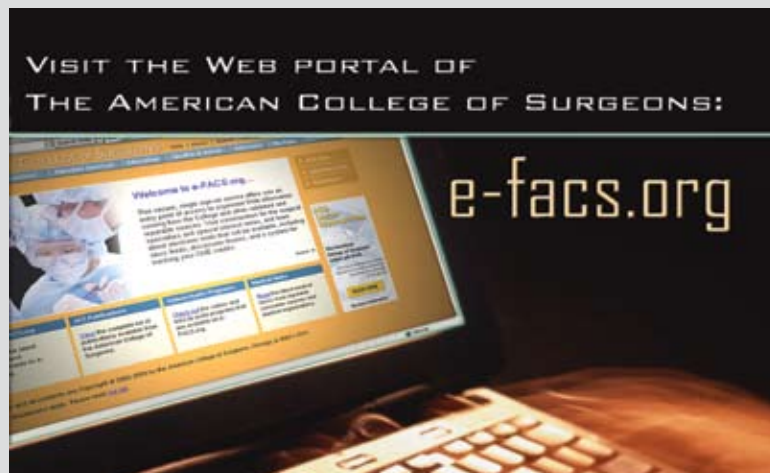
down)—that is, the quality of loyalty. Jim Thompson was intensely loyal to his friends, to his colleagues, to his department, to his institution UTMB, and to Texas. I sometimes asked myself, if I were in the trenches with the Viet Cong or North Koreans coming at me with guns blazing, who would I want in the trenches with me? The answer was, without doubt, Jim Thompson.

The final attribute that deserves comment is his warmth of personality. Words that characterize his personality include colorful, irreverent, sometimes outrageous, funny, bombastic, eloquent, occasionally inoffensively vulgar, charming, and engaging. He was never dull. Above all, he was fun to be with in social situations and an unforgettable friend. I doubt that there will ever be another professor of surgery like him.

Jim Thompson will be remembered forever by his stu-

dents, residents, research fellows, and coworkers—young and mature alike—as an inspirational teacher and role model of what a university professor should be. He will be remembered by his colleagues and the surgical profession as a leader who influenced the course of a great university. He will be remembered by his many, many friends as a warm, thoughtful, generous, loyal, and engaging man who enriched the lives of all who had the good fortune of coming to know him. And, of course, he will be sorely missed by his six children, five grandchildren, longtime companion Bebe Jensen, and the entire Orloff family who knew him as Uncle Jim.

Dr. Orloff is Distinguished Professor of Surgery, Emeritus, in the department of surgery at University of California–San Diego.



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