

In memoriam:

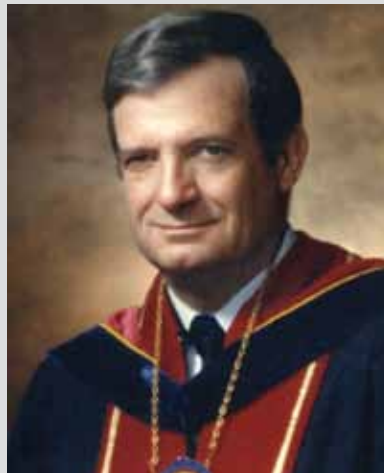
David Coston Sabiston, Jr., MD, FACS: October 4, 1924–January 26, 2009

by C. Rollins Hanlon, MD, FACS, Executive Consultant

In January 2009, the surgical world lost a great light when David Coston Sabiston, Jr., peacefully expired at the age of 84 after a long illness. Having recovered significantly from a severe stroke in 1997, he was struck down again four years later in an episode that brought to a public end one of the most distinguished careers in modern surgical history.

American surgery's last century is replete with the names of individuals distinguished in research or clinical practice, in administrative prowess or organizational achievement, or even as professional educators. Some have outstanding records in more than one of these categories, but it is rare to achieve world-class distinction in every facet of a surgical career. David Sabiston merits top honors in all of these areas: research, clinical practice, administration, and teaching, with his role as a teacher characterizing and crowning all his other achievements.

Directors of surgical departments are expected to build their faculty roster, provide expert care for surgical patients, advance the frontiers of their profession, and arrange for teaching at all academic levels from medical students and house officers to junior and even senior attending surgeons. When David



Dr. Sabiston

Sabiston accepted the James B. Duke Professorship of Surgery at Duke University in 1963, he embarked on a complex teaching enterprise that was successfully pursued over the next three decades. It was his deliberate, long-range plan to capture the interest of medical students who entered his orbit, to infuse them with a knowledge of surgery's history and future prospects, and to select from the brightest of these students the house officers for his long and demanding residency program. Out of that residency program, with its obligate research component, would come the faculty members of his department. These individuals were stamped with the

high principles and disciplined enthusiasm of their mentor, standing ready for recruitment to divisional and departmental chairs at other universities.

David Sabiston loved to teach at every level of the educational pyramid, from the beginning medical student to the audiences at his innumerable eponymous lectures throughout the world. He taught in the Socratic fashion, which can challenge and even terrify the individual on the other end of the exchange. Such terrors were mitigated or abolished by his diligent work in mastering the names and background of his medical student pupils, beginning with a reception at his home, presided over by his charming consort Agnes, universally known as "Aggie." The end product of his long-range project in teaching was a formidable cadre of chief resident surgeons, doubling the biblical number of 72 disciples, with 88 ending up in academic pursuits and 24 serving as departmental chairs or division chiefs.

Teaching was David's *métier*, pursued with unflagging determination in a schedule that emphasized precision in action and the value of hard work. A sense of history fostered his adoption of Sir William Osler's motto that work was the "mas-

ter word,” and his immense accomplishments would have been impossible without a devotion to filling Kipling’s “unforgiving minute” with its full complement of directed effort.

Teaching and publishing

Inspired and challenged by the organizational tenets of his Johns Hopkins mentor, Alfred Blalock, MD, FACS, he followed a similar pattern in developing what might fairly be called the Sabiston school of surgery. In the Halsted tradition, he adhered to a long and arduous model of the surgical residency, with a major focus on the production of seasoned academicians. As a Fulbright Scholar in England, his historical interests must have been amplified by the Hunterian legacy of research and clinical experimentation engrafted on his two years of laboratory work at Walter Reed Army Hospital under the meticulous guidance of Donald Gregg, MD.

His personal relations with his pupils were marked by a gracious pedagogy at the medical student stage, with an attitude that became more critical and exacting as the interns and residents assumed greater responsibility under what many perceived as a stern taskmaster. But he took great satisfaction and justifiable pride in the accomplishments of his residents and faculty, nurturing them in their early development, fostering their progress, and providing a ready ear for counsel as they rounded out their careers in other locations. As might be expected with such a dominant teacher over so long a tenure, there were many anecdotes about his

rigorous clinical rounds, and his affectionate characterization as “The Man” signified the respect and awe that were generated by his almost legendary capacities.

To set out even a skeletal portrayal of his accomplishments and honors would exhaust the space available for this appreciation. Fortunately, some five years ago, a Festschrift was mounted by his former residents and colleagues in the pages of the *Annals of Surgery*, a journal that he had edited so superbly for 27 years. In those accounts* are portrayed the many aspects of his multifaceted career, set out in affectionate detail by his admiring associates. One also finds here a portrait of the family atmosphere afforded to residents and their wives under the guidance and solicitude of Agnes Sabiston, whose faithful support of her husband went on, in sickness and in health, for 54 years.

The repeated teaching awards to David Sabiston in multiple categories at Duke testify to the activity that provided him with his greatest satisfaction. National awards for teaching also came his way and he was honored by initiation of a Sabiston teaching award, cherished by those who aspired successfully to imitate their mentor.

His renowned *Textbook of Surgery*, subtitled “The Biological Basis of Modern Surgical Practice,” was erected on the text by Frederick Christopher and first sold in 1936 at a price (as I recall)

*Anderson RW, Jacobs DO, Pappas TN. Introductory remarks, Sabiston Festschrift. *Ann Surg.* 2003;238:1-2; and Chitwood WR Jr. The Sabiston heritage: Excellence in surgical education. *Ann Surg.* 2003;238:3-17.

of \$8. Christopher edited five editions in 20 years before Loyal Davis took over for four editions, extending to the Sabiston era in 1972. This tenth edition was titled *Davis-Christopher Textbook of Surgery*, stressing “the biological principles and derangements which form the basis of disease.” It emphasized Sabiston’s continuing historical interests and teaching practice by including a 25-page account of “The Development of Surgery” by the distinguished historian, Gert H. Brieger, MD. This edition was highly regarded and eagerly purchased by students and surgeons throughout the world. My own presentation copy, in its pristine, aromatic state, even attracted the favorable attention of canine members of our household, as indicated by a significant defect at the top of the book’s spine, reflecting the munching of a young English bulldog, possibly correlative with David’s own Anglophile leanings. The book is revealingly dedicated to “medical students and residents, who through their concern, inquisitiveness and impressive abilities continuously stimulate improvements in the diagnosis and management of the sick”—a nice statement of the beneficial reciprocity between teacher and student.

Research and organizational achievements

As a member of Alfred Blalock’s full-time faculty some six decades ago, I first encountered David Sabiston during his surgical internship. It was an edifying experience to watch his early clinical development in concert with other brilliant

contemporaries such as James V. Maloney, Jr., and Frank C. Spencer. As one's own career was fostered by the advice and sponsorship of Dr. Blalock, it was heartening to see such younger colleagues achieve academic prominence under the inspiration and skilled guidance of "the Professor."

Sabiston rose rapidly to professorial status at Johns Hopkins after his laboratory years under Gregg and his sojourn in England. His research productivity flourished and his eminence as an educator was advanced by his 27 years as editor of *Annals of Surgery*. Despite these editorial labors, along with heavy responsibilities for his splendid surgical textbook, he found time for the arduous demands of teaching, because he considered it both important and enjoyable.

His research heritage in cardiovascular surgery was complemented by significant primary initiatives in clinical surgery, covering myocardial revascularization and thromboendarterectomy for chronic pulmonary embolism. For more than 30 years, his department was supported by a teaching grant from the National Institutes of Health and he facilitated the research careers of his residents and associates with unwavering intensity. The productivity of his associates in publication of peer-reviewed papers was an index of solid research that brought in massive, continuing extramural funding.

His extramural activities were prodigious, attested by hundreds of named lectures and by numerous visiting professorships in this country and abroad. He was

given honorary membership in more than a dozen international surgical associations, societies, and colleges and was awarded a comparable number of awards, prizes, and medals by universities and associations.

He did not shirk the demanding work of national committees dealing with research and education, and he provided decades of professorial support for the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. His extended work on various aspects of the report on Graduate Professional Education of the Physician under the sponsorship of the Association of American Medical Colleges is poorly known but highly important.

Finally, I note his monumental work with the American College of Surgeons. Initiated into Fellowship at the age of 33, he participated diligently in its programs before being recognized in 1972 as Secretary of the Board of Governors, followed by a year as Chair of that body until 1975, when he was elected to the Board of Regents. He served on the Board for nine years, occupying the Chair from 1982 to 1984 and serving as President of the College in 1985 to 1986. It was my privilege as Director of the College to work in close concert with him as he dealt serenely and effectively with many internal and external challenges. Despite the intractability of issues such as professional liability, he developed a particular interest and grasp of that daunting problem, maintaining a lively involvement even after demitting the presidency.

This presentation is necessarily an incomplete sketch of

50 active years in the life of a great surgeon, cut short in his prime by a devastating illness. It says nothing of his three daughters and five grandchildren who formed a devoted family complex under the faithful eye of his splendid consort. But it emphasizes the defining characteristic of his life as a teacher and hero for hundreds of young surgeons and others who came under his powerful influence. He was a man in full, who aimed to emulate his professor, Alfred Blalock; in this effort, he succeeded and indeed surpassed his mentor in the number of academic disciples from his own program. Formed in an uncompromising tradition, these surgeons represent a superlative legacy of this teaching colossus.

Fortitude under adversity

At his memorial service in the Duke University Chapel, a full congregation heard from Robert W. Anderson, MD, FACS, a successor chairman emeritus and president of the Sabiston Society. His account of some lighter moments in the Sabiston story were balanced by the inspiring account of Merel H. Harmel, MD, emeritus professor of anesthesiology. In Merel's multiple visits to his longtime friend and associate during the final days of his 11-year disability, he never heard from David the slightest expression of self-pity for the heavy burden of illness that had been imposed on him. On the contrary, David demonstrated the same uncommon resilience and fortitude in his approach to death that had marked a life magnificently lived. Requiescat in pace.