

My mentor

Laceration:

John Kelley MacGregor, MD, FACS

by Jay M. MacGregor, MD

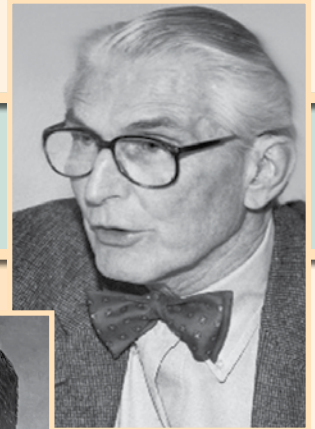
Spending the day with a surgeon was an honor beyond description for me as a gangly boy in sixth grade. If the medical community in my sleepy Iowa town was an army, John Kelley, MD, FACS, was our general. “Dr. John,” as he was universally known, was intelligent, funny, and eager to share the joys of surgery. I still remember his pager barking for attention that morning. A child had a lip laceration that would require stitches and the family was hoping Dr. John could be involved.

We jumped into his yellow Ford Bronco and sped toward the hospital. As he drove, he gently recited some of the more exciting points of managing skin lacerations in children. Whatever a dermis was, I thought, it certainly sounded fascinating. It was clear to me that Dr. John enjoyed his role as a teacher almost as much as I cherished being his apprentice.

We entered the hospital with purposeful strides. He assured me the boy’s gnarled lip was easily remedied. We raced to the locker room. His blue scrubs accentuated a svelte build not appreciable in his tweed jacket and red bow tie. He could have been a triathlete if such an event existed in his youth.

We moved to the operating room. Dr. John quickly introduced me to the nurses as he left to scrub. He proceeded to wash his hands the way a car enthusiast waxes a vintage Mustang. Methodically he prepared those dexterous fingers. The actual surgery, from my perspective, was a well-orchestrated blur of stitches, scissors, and blue towels.

In the years that passed, I spent a number of days learning from Dr. John. As my interest in medicine matured, he was there to offer guidance, support, and insight. His mentorship in my personal and professional development focused on the joy of medicine, our responsibilities to patients, and the power of a good laugh. In our numerous lunches, he never mentioned reimbursement, work hours, or lifestyle. Dr. John pursued medicine with a conviction I found intoxicating.



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Dr. John retired in his 70s. Retirement provided my mentor more time to share stories over leisurely lunches followed by an obligatory stroll through the hospital. As I prepared for college, he encouraged me to study hard and stay focused. His smile couldn’t mask how much he missed the operating room and his role as a surgeon.

Dr. John died when I was in medical school. I was crushed he didn’t get to see me graduate. His funeral was a standing-room-only event. His former patients gave me hugs and told me about their ruptured appendix or their mother’s pneumothorax. These stories were shared with me not because Dr. John was my mentor, but because he was also my grandfather.

When I think about my grandfather, and the lessons he shared with me, I can’t help but smile. And when I do, I can appreciate the slightest trace of a well-healed lip laceration repaired by my mentor, and grandfather, Dr. John Kelley MacGregor. Ω

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