

Denton A. Cooley: Master surgeon and educator

Denton A. Cooley: maestro cirujano y educador

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On November 18, 2016, Dr. Denton Arthur Cooley, one of the most famous surgeons of the 20th century, died at his residence in Houston at age 96 (Fig. 1)¹.

Cooley was born in Houston, Texas, to a well-off family, which allowed him to have access to a higher education, first at the University of Texas at Galveston and then to graduate from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, where since early in his training, he became interested in cardiovascular surgery under the guidance of the head of the surgery department, Dr. Alfred Blalock, whom he assisted while being a resident in 1944 in the historic operation to palliate severe cyanosis in patients with tetralogy of Fallot by bypassing the subclavian artery to the pulmonary artery, later known as the Blalock-Taussig operation, which brought world fame to that university and was undoubtedly the start-up of heart surgery of modern era².

On finishing surgical residency at Hopkins in 1951, Cooley spent 1 year working with the pioneer of cardiac surgery in England, Sir Russel Brock, and when he returned to Houston, he started his long-standing relationship with renowned surgeon Michael DeBakey, forming a great cardiovascular surgery team responsible for major advances in surgery of the aorta and great vessels, peripheral vascular surgery, aortocoronary bypass with the saphenous vein, and a wide variety of procedures to treat congenital heart disease, turning Houston into one of the most prestigious cardiac surgery centers of the world.

On December 3, 1967, Christian Barnard, in South Africa, revolutionized the field of surgery by performing the first human heart transplant, which was followed on May 3, 1968, by the first heart transplant in the Western Hemisphere by Dr. Cooley at St. Lukes Episcopal Hospital in Houston, where a great rivalry with Dr. DeBakey was born, which culminated in complete break-up when Dr. Cooley implanted the first artificial heart on April 4, 1969, to a patient with severe heart failure while he was trying to obtain a suitable donor. The implant worked for 64 h until the donor was found, and Cooley performed the transplant, but the patient died from pneumonia the next day. The artificial heart program was steered by Dr. DeBakey who was enraged by the audacious deed carried out without his authorization and lodged a complaint against Cooley who was reprimanded by the American College of Surgeons and expelled from Baylor College of Medicine, which drove him to found the Texas Heart Institute in Houston, where he continued his brilliant career. At age 50, he had already performed more than 5000 heart operations and he continued to operate there until he was 87 years of age, when he was forced to stay away from operating rooms due to a serious problem of deforming arthritis of the hands. His scientific production throughout his career was vast, with more than 1400 published articles and 12 books; one of the last ones had the title *100,000 Hearts*³.

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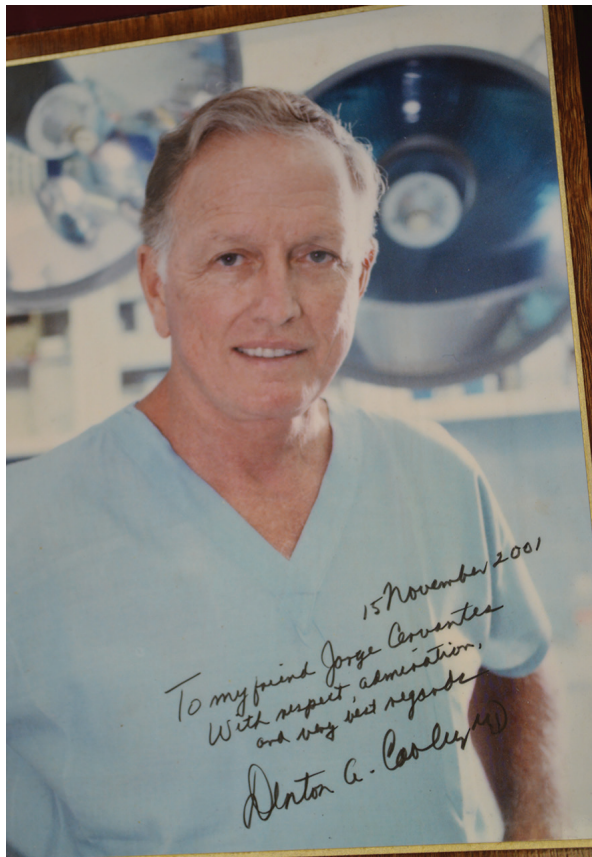


Figure 1. Doctor Denton A. Cooley.

Dr. Cooley was an undisputed leader in world surgery and received numerous honors. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the United States Government highest civilian award, and the International Surgical Society/Société Internationale de Chirurgie awarded him the Rene Leriche Medal, honoring him as the world's

most distinguished cardiovascular surgeon. In 1980, the Denton A. Cooley Surgical Society was founded, bringing together hundreds of his students who excelled at their local settings thanks to the training received under his masterful guidance and example. Many Mexican surgeons were fortunate to have him as a teacher and there were numerous occasions when Dr. Cooley took part in surgical events in our country.

The feud with Dr. DeBakey lasted more than 40 years, until on November 7, 2007, in a special event at the Denton Cooley Surgical Society, Dr. Cooley, who then was 87 years old, offered his teacher, Dr. Michel DeBakey, who was 99, a great tribute. DeBakey, in a wheelchair, recovering from major heart surgery, gratefully received the recognition and effusively shook hands with his distinguished student.

Dr. Cooley was married for 67 years to Louise Thomas, his girlfriend he met in Baltimore while studying medicine. She passed away before him. They had five daughters who gave them 16 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

Rest in peace, dear Dr. Denton A. Cooley. His memory will be fondly reminisced by all of us who had the privilege of knowing him.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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