



Leonard Wolsey Cronkhite, Jr.



On July 20, 1996, Leonard Wolsey Cronkhite Jr. – president of Children’s Hospital, Boston, from 1962 to 1977, and president of the Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, from 1977 to 1985 – died at his home in Brunswick, Maine at the age of 77.

An exceptional leader and a dynamic administrator, Len Cronkhite had a rich life and varied career. He was a military intelligence officer, a Boston internist, and an instructor in medicine and lecturer at Harvard Medical School (HMS) and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). He was also an industrial physician, an organizer of medical care groups and health plans for industry and labor, a successful entrepreneur, an expert on human survival in space, and a trained parachutist

in command of airborne troops.

When meeting Len for the first time, one was invariably struck by the fact that this man was not only a caring leader, but also an individual with broad vision tempered by wit. Upon my arrival at Children’s Hospital in 1967 as the newest member of the administrative staff, Len asked me where I had done my graduate work in public health and management. When I replied confidently that it had been at Yale, he queried whether that was that small college in Bridgeport or was it in Hartford. This was my first lesson at the hands of a master who would never allow you to take yourself too seriously, and in whose eyes the only respected credential was demonstrated performance.

Born in Newton, Massachusetts, on May 4, 1919, Len was educated in Needham public schools and Bowdoin College, where he enrolled in its pre-medicine program. In 1939, at age 20, Len enlisted in the Maine National Guard, and nine months later, was given a commission as a second lieutenant. In 1941, at the beginning of his senior year at Bowdoin, Len was mobilized and sent to Artillery School at Fort

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

Monroe. By the time he had graduated from Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth in 1943, he had risen to major.

Len courageously served his country during World War II in the Caribbean and Pacific, receiving the Legion of Merit with Oak Leaf Cluster and the Army Commendation Medal, and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Medal. In 1946, at age 27, Len became a full colonel and returned that summer to Bowdoin to complete his Bachelor of Science degree. He immediately applied and was admitted to Harvard Medical School, and in 1950, received his M.D., financing his medical education through a combination of colonel's pay for active duty each summer and the GI bill.

A superb clinician, Len trained in internal medicine and was a clinical fellow in metabolic diseases at MGH. In 1955 he entered private practice, and received staff appointments at HMS and MGH. For the next several years, as his private practice grew, he established and directed health plans for several Boston-based companies and Local 380 of the Teamsters Union.

During this time, he authored many articles in scientific journals on metabolic diseases involving the intestinal tract, cardiac arrest and the 1955 poliomyelitis epidemic. Len's interest in industrial consultation carried him in many other directions as well, including the space program, where he studied life support systems for space vehicles.

In 1961, recognizing that the demands of his private practice and business pursuits left him little time for his other love, the military, Len left his practice and returned to active duty in military intelligence; he was given charge of an airborne command. To prepare himself, he took up night-time cross-country running, which prompted the local police to regard him with great suspicion as "some kind of a nut," he once said.

He proceeded to Jump School at Fort Banning, Georgia, where he trained and qualified as a parachutist, making six jumps from an airplane flying at a 1,250-foot altitude. About that period, he commented, "I gave away 20 years to the younger men, and it almost killed me." Len was sent to Alaska and the Aleutian Islands for maneuvers, and served as an observer for the Department of the Army.

It was there in February of 1962 that Len, who then held the rank of major general, was contacted by the Board of Trustees at Children's Hospital for the leadership position at the institution. Within a week, Len was at Children's for interviews, and within two weeks, he had been selected and had accepted the position of general director of Children's Hospital, Boston.

Choosing Len Cronkhite to lead the hospital was considered a bold and exciting decision because Len was someone who could bring Children's into the era of modern health care management and delivery. Len had keen insight into the evolution of the health care system, and recognized even then that ambulatory medicine and community-based primary care would play an increasingly important role in

care delivery. Under Len's direction, Children's undertook and completed in 1967 the construction of the Fegan ambulatory care center, one of the first modern ambulatory care centers in the nation; to this day, Fegan still houses the hospital's core outpatient programs.

This facility represented a departure from tradition for Children's and for hospitals in general. Prior to Fegan's construction, outpatient facilities were not considered important. They were characterized by long waiting lines of patients, most of whom could not afford private medical care, and the "long wooden benches" in poorly maintained institutional corridors. Len worked with Children's architects and designers to develop a structure and ambiance for the Fegan building that was family-friendly and functional, offering quality care with privacy, dignity and comfort to each patient and family without regard to financial status. Taking a lesson from industry, Len also developed at Children's the first computerized system in the nation for scheduling outpatient visits by appointment, significantly reducing waiting time for clinic visits.

Len was prescient in recognizing both increased parental involvement in the care of a sick child, and the movement of health care to the community setting. It was Len's innovative idea to build the Inn at Children's. The Inn allowed families from out of town to stay next door to the hospital, giving parents the opportunity to be more closely involved in the life and care of their hospitalized child. In 1966, Len helped to open the Martha Eliot Health Center, a Children's ambulatory care center, located in an under-served area of the city in desperate need of child and family health services. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, Martha Eliot Health Center, which is still operated by Children's Hospital, was one of the first hospital-sponsored neighborhood health centers in the country to provide comprehensive pediatric and family health services in a community setting.

Len understood well the delicate balance that had to be struck among patient care, teaching, research and public service if Children's Hospital was to remain in the forefront of pediatric medicine. In 1970, at a time when federal funds were beginning to ebb, he mustered support for the construction of the John Enders Pediatric Research Laboratories at Children's in order to attract leading physician-scientists from around the world. The Enders Laboratories have established Children's as the leading pediatric research institute in the world.

Len had many other areas of interest and received recognition and awards throughout his lifetime. In 1973 he was awarded the Bowdoin Prize, given to a graduate of national distinction, and an honorary Doctorate of Laws from Bowdoin College. He also received an honorary Doctorate in Humanities from Curry College. Len served as chairman of the Association of American Medical Colleges and chairman of its Council of Teaching Hospitals, and was senior fellow for the Institute of Medicine and for the National Academy of Sciences.

After leaving Children's, Len became president of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, from where he retired in 1985, returning to live in Brunswick, Maine. During the remainder of his

life, he stayed active in the affairs of his beloved Bowdoin College. Having served on the boards of Overseers and Trustees at Bowdoin College, Len became chairman of Bowdoin's Board of Trustees in 1987, and in 1994 was named trustee emeritus.

Len is survived by his wife, Linda Marchky Cronkhite, of Brunswick, Maine, and four daughters.

Len Cronkhite was a man of imagination, courage and great humor. He was a dreamer and an implementer, who never stopped teaching or learning, and who instilled in all who knew and worked with him a determination to achieve the very best. As a mentor and friend to so many of us at Children's, his lively spirit and determination will be truly missed.

Respectfully submitted,

David S. Weiner