



Walter S. Kerr



Walter S. Kerr Jr., MD died at the age of 94 on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013 at St. Andrews Hospital in Boothbay Harbor, Maine after a brief illness.

Walter was born August, 18, 1918 at the Homeopathic Hospital in Boston to Walter S. Kerr and Nellie Raps Kerr. He grew up in Cohasset, Massachusetts and as a young boy spent many afternoons at nearby Oaks Farm, which his father managed and which was renowned for prize winning Guernsey cattle. “Buddy” accompanied his father on cattle buying trips to the Isle of Guernsey in the English Channel. This experience was formative in developing a desire in him to travel to other countries and understand their cultures which he did later in life.

In the 1920s, Cohasset was a small, rural town with many hunters. Walter developed an interest in taxidermy and completed a taxidermy correspondence course from The Northwest School of Taxidermy. Walter quickly developed a reputation with the local hunters as a skilled taxidermist. To his mother’s distress, many a night, neighbors would bring deer, sea ducks and other wildlife to Buddy to be stuffed and mounted.

Eighty years later, a red squirrel on the sun porch wall of his cottage still watches sailboats and lobster boats off Squirrel Island—attesting to his skill in taxidermy.

Walter graduated from Thayer Academy in 1935, Harvard College in 1939 and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1943. In 1943 he began his internship at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) under the direction of the Chief of Surgery, Edward Churchill.

In 1944, Walter entered the Medical Corps of the United States Army. He served at various Army hospitals across the country before being deployed to the European Theater, where he served with a field hospital stationed in Belgium. He was discharged with the rank of Captain in 1946.

After his discharge, Walter returned to the MGH to resume his training as a resident in surgery and urology which he completed in 1949. In those days surgical house officers often stayed in the hospital for weeks at a time. Not wishing to remain idle for any period, Walter built a dingy in his sleeping quarters using the hospital shop to steam and fit the planks for the boat. He recalled with pride that the dingy lasted for many years and was a “good little boat”. He was a member of the Urology Service at the MGH from 1947 until his retirement in 1987, rising from instructor of surgery at the Harvard Medical School to the position of Clinical Professor in Surgery in 1981. He was a renowned clinician. Indeed, he prided himself in the speed with which he could do a supra pubic prostatectomy—on one occasion it took him ten minutes from skin incision to having the prostate in hand. Residents knew that if they were not scrubbed when Walter entered the operating room, the prostate would be out before they could get to the table.

Walter was a member of a number of surgical societies, including the American Urological Association, serving as President from 1976-1977, the New England Surgical Society, the American Association of Genitourinary Surgeons, the Clinical Society of Genitourinary Surgeons, the Society of Pelvic Surgeons, La Societe Internationale d’Urologie and the American Society of Fertility. He was also a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. He authored 45 articles and presented papers at numerous conferences in the United States and South America during his career. Among his most influential publications were: “The value of thoraco-abdominal incision in the removal of kidney tumors,” published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1949 in which this incision was used for the first time in the removal of large renal tumors, “Effect of graded compression of the renal artery on water and solute excretion,” published in the American Journal of Physiology in 1954, “Effects of complete ureteral obstruction in dogs on kidney function,” published in the American Journal of Physiology in 1956, “Carcinoma of the prostate treated by radical prostatectomy: A clinical pathologic study of 187 cases followed for five years and 148 cases followed for ten years,” published in Cancer in 1963 in which tumor grade and seminal vesicle invasion were first shown to be correlated with prognosis, and a number of papers outlining the use of arteriography and thrombosis for traumatic bleeding and traumatic injuries in the pelvis. Walter was most proud of the two articles cited above which were published in the American Journal of Physiology. He recalled that “there were few urology papers at the time published in this prestigious journal...and they are still quoted”.

His term as President of the American Urological Association was marked by his strong interest in educating the urological community to the necessity of controlling medical costs. To that end, he established the “Walter S. Kerr Jr. Prize Essay Contest of the American Urological Association,” which provides an award for the paper judged most deserving on cost containment methods from a Resident in Urology.

In 1996, the Walter S. Kerr Jr. Professorship in Urology at the Harvard Medical School was endowed in his honor. This was the first endowed Urology Chair at Harvard. Thus far, by tradition, the chief of the Department of Urology at the MGH holds that appointment.

Walter was a born teacher. He was patient, kind and respectful of the student no matter his ability or level of training. He taught surgical skills to medical students from Harvard, MGH interns and residents as well as physicians from around the world. In 1964, he volunteered to work for six weeks on the S.S. HOPE, the world’s first peacetime hospital ship which at that time was moored in Conakry, Guinea, located on the west coast of Africa. Before he left to fly to Africa, Walter talked to returning doctors and inquired as to what supplies were most urgently needed on the ship. He then approached his colleagues

in Boston seeking donations of surgical equipment and supplies which he took with him.

Walter was an active sportsman, sailor and skier all of his life. His fly fishing trips took him to Iceland, throughout the Canadian Maritimes and Scotland. One of his great loves was the World War II wooden lifeboat he named Rijkel, on which he took his family on picnics and many cruises Down East on the coast of Maine, reaching Cape Breton, Nova Scotia one summer. His interests included the genealogy of his family.

After he retired, Walter and his wife Olive traveled extensively to every continent except Antarctica. He had a life long habit of researching the cultures, history and geography of the places that he planned to visit. He also embraced the modern world of cell phones, computers and the Internet.

After living in Milton, Mass., for 55 years, in 2010, Walter and Olive moved to St. Andrews Village Retirement Community in Boothbay Harbor to be near family members and where he and Olive spent their remaining days.

Respectfully submitted,
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