



# Simmons Lessell



*Photograph Courtesy of John Earle Photography*

Simmons Lessell, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology and pioneer in the field of Neuro-Ophthalmology, died just shy of his 83rd birthday on May 9, 2016.

Simmons, as he preferred to be called, was born in 1933 in Brooklyn, New York where he was raised in a multi-cultural neighborhood with an older sister. The family lived in a walk-up apartment behind his father's dental office. Simmons' potential for success was recognized and rewarded early by admission to the renowned Stuyvesant high school in New York City (where he was selected into the Arista Honors Society) and then to Amherst College in Western Massachusetts where he graduated in 1954. Both

institutions nourished Simmons' inherent drive for excellence, and he always maintained a deep fondness of his time at both schools. Upon meeting new acquaintances, Simmons often asked about their educational background, and he offered quick friendship to those who shared his vaunted educational experiences. Both schools admitted only male students at that time, but fate intervened when Simmons was introduced on a blind date to Irma Frances Miller while he was at Amherst. Simmons' college thesis described his discovery of a fossil of a previously unknown rodent-like animal, which he affectionately named *Perognathus irmae*! Irma and Simmons married in 1955, one year after they met, and together they had four children, all boys.

Simmons glimpsed patient care through his father's practice as a dentist. Driven by this interest, Simmons pursued a pre-medical curriculum at Amherst and was accepted into Cornell Medical School where he received his Medical Doctor degree in 1958. The conceptual foundation for the discipline of Neuro-ophthalmology had not been introduced until the mid 1930s, and by 1960 there were only a handful

of Neuro-Ophthalmologists in the United States. During medical school and his internship (at the Bellevue Hospital, New York City), Simmons was substantially influenced by Dr. Edward Norton, who had the unique distinction (at that time) of having trained in Neurology, Ophthalmology *and* Neuro-Ophthalmology. Simmons' exposure to Dr. Norton likely motivated him to emulate this melded pathway and pursue a career in the emerging sub-specialty of Neuro-ophthalmology. Simmons spent one year as a Neurology resident at the University of Vermont where he was indelibly influenced by the first of his two great mentors, George Schumacher, MD, who was a widely recognized authority on the subject of multiple sclerosis. Dr. Schumacher practiced Medicine with rigor and was intellectually punctilious, which complemented Simmons' persona. At that time, neuroimaging was in its infancy, as computed tomography was not introduced into clinical medicine until 1971. Neuro-ophthalmologists had been relying on clinical acumen to diagnose disease and even guide the tactical approach to neurosurgery. As new technologies revolutionized the diagnostic approach, Simmons was fond of saying "that clinicians should not worship icons", meaning that a clinician had to adjudicate the medical significance of diagnostic tests, especially when test results conflicted with the clinician's intuition. While in Vermont, Simmons received a Western Union telegram, which hung in his office throughout his career, that displayed his acceptance into Harvard's Ophthalmology residency program based at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear (MEE), which he was to begin two years hence (i.e. in 1962).

After his time with Dr. Schumacher, who remained a life-long friend, Simmons spent two years within the Epidemiology and Genetics Branch of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness at the National Institutes of Health where he attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel within the U.S. Public Health Service. He was assigned to the island of Guam where he was the only neurologist for 60,000 civilians and military personnel stationed across the far Pacific. There he investigated the Lytico-Bodig disease (i.e. combined Parkinsonism-Dementia complex and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) that was highly prevalent on that island. His studies on these disorders, and another on seizure disorders, led to his first five scientific publications. The Parkinsonian-Dementia-ALS complex of disorders was described by L.T. Kurland just six years before Simmons arrived, and Dr. Kurland, who is often recognized as the "Father of Neuroepidemiology", co-authored all seven of Simmons' initial publications. The seventh was on the topic of multiple sclerosis, which blended with the rich experience that Simmons had enjoyed with Dr. Schumacher.

Upon returning to the United States, Simmons began a three-year pre-residency fellowship within the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School, which was the first ophthalmic research "think tank" in the world. The Howe laboratory was founded in 1940 by Dr. David Glendenning Cogan, who was one of the most influential ophthalmologists in the world during the 20th century and who served as Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at Harvard from 1955-73. During his time in the Howe laboratory, Simmons learned a variety of scientific methods to visualize neural structures of the visual pathways, which formed the basis for two publications with the eminent research scientist, Toichiro Kuwabara. This scientific experience was enriched by clinical discussions of cases from the Neuro-Ophthalmology service at MEE which Dr. Cogan had founded. Simmons and Dr.

Cogan shared an interest in all things neurological, and Dr. Cogan became Simmons' second significant mentor.

Simmons' first faculty position was as the Neuro-Ophthalmologist at Boston University Medical Center, where he spent 18 years and rose to the rank of Professor of Ophthalmology, Neurology and Anatomy. Simmons was a perennial favorite among students because of his energized and deft style of teaching, laced with a sterling wit and spiced with jokes, which on occasion would attract administrative scrutiny! His gifts as a teacher were recognized with the prestigious Metcalf cup and prize, which is given annually to *the* outstanding teacher throughout all of Boston University (i.e. not just the Medical school). During those years, Simmons performed cataract and orbital surgeries, and as a right-of-passage essentially all trainees at Boston University performed their first cataract procedure with him. During this time, Simmons quickly built an international reputation in the ascendant field of Neuro-Ophthalmology. Simmons spent 18 years at Boston University before returning to Harvard in 1984 as a Professor of Ophthalmology and Director of the Neuro-Ophthalmology service. He began to accept clinical fellows every academic year, and with later expansion of that program, over his career Simmons trained 52 fellows, most of whom maintained academic positions. Notably, five of his former fellows became Chairman of Departments of Ophthalmology or Neurology, and one became an Assistant Dean at a Medical School.

During his time at MEE, Simmons received the Outstanding Teacher Award in the Harvard Department of Ophthalmology in 2004, a Distinguished Alumnus award of the Infirmary in 2006, and the William Silen Lifetime Achievement in Mentoring Award at Harvard Medical School in 2014. In 2006, he became the first incumbent of the endowed chair named in honor of one of his most influential teachers, Paul A. Chandler, MD., another luminary who was an internationally recognized authority in the field of Glaucoma. This honor was bestowed to Simmons because he, like Dr. Chandler, was revered for academic excellence and for enthusiastic commitments both to patient care and to teaching.

Simmons stepped down as Director of the Neuro-Ophthalmology service in 2004 and was appointed Director of Medical Education for the Harvard Department of Ophthalmology. In this capacity, Simmons transformed the *advanced* medical student elective in ophthalmology by requiring that a faculty member be dedicated to each student as a "mentor" in an attempt to foster the type of influential guidance that he had received early in his career. Simmons was also appointed as the Faculty and Trainee Development Advisor, a role in which he provided mentorship across all levels of the faculty, with special emphasis on enhancing the potential for academic promotion among the junior faculty.

Simmons published over 200 peer-reviewed articles, chapters, and reviews, and he held consecutive funding from the NIH for 13 years early in his career. His remarkable productivity, stellar reputation as a diagnostician, and his educational legacy led to recognition as recipient of the Distinguished Achievement Award by the New England Ophthalmological Society, which was awarded posthumously in 2016.

Simmons relished his academic life, and eschewed seeking or accepting positions of higher administrative authority. He was cautious about assuming too many obligations and he always completed tasks well in advance of deadlines. These guidelines enabled him to linger on the activities that he most cared about – patient care, teaching, and reading in the library at the MEE. He was the proverbial “doctor’s doctor”, and he communicated effectively with physicians who regularly sought his guidance. Despite his broad appeal and success at the podium, Simmons’ preference was for one-on-one teaching, ideally in the presence of a patient. Simmons lingered in discussions with patients and mixed causal banter with incisive questions, all the while engaging with a trainee.

Throughout his career, Simmons enjoyed learning about the personal interests of his trainees. He freely offered advice about the importance of enjoying life and balancing life’s obligations, and he was generous with his time. He summed up keys to success as always being “able, affable and available”. The depth of his bond with his fellows was collectively expressed at a Festschrift that was held in his honor on May 25, 2013, the day of his 80th birthday. The lectures at this event were delivered by his former fellows, who reflected on how Simmons had influenced their lives and careers. Simmons closed the festivities with a remarkably humble statement of appreciation to his fellows for having enriched his own life and for contributing to his own education. In a substantial display of appreciation, many of his trainees, together with generous colleagues and friends, raised funds to endow the education of Neuro-Ophthalmology Fellows at MEE. Simmons did not seek to build a legacy, but he would have been gratified to learn that his name would be linked in perpetuity to the professional topics that he most loved: education and Neuro-ophthalmology.

Simmons’ professional dedication was balanced by an extraordinary breadth of interests. He was *the* raconteur at the luncheon table at the MEE, where among residents, fellows and other faculty members he was equally facile with esoteric topics as he was with off-color jokes. On his Amherst biographical sketch, he listed music, astronomy and fishing as avocations, and in college he studied archeology and participated in digs at archeological sites. His true aesthetic love, however, was classical opera, and he would often hum melodies of his favorite arias as he walked into the office early each day, usually prior to the arrival of his trainees. Simmons read widely and across genres, including classical literature, history, fiction and especially biographies. Simmons was as comfortable discussing statistics of the long-forgotten Brooklyn Dodgers as he was with in his insightful article entitled “A Retrospective Look at Prospective Investigations”, which he published as a sole author in 2007. Simmons had a formidable cache for jokes, always delivered with a flair and his characteristic chortle and with the same enthusiasm to one person or to a crowd - no congregation was too small. Despite his erudition and notoriety, Simmons was kind to everyone in the hospital, from senior administrators to the ancillary facility staff.

Simmons enjoyed his free time by fishing, which he almost *always* shared with his wife, who became expert at designing and making flies that they would use when fishing. Simmons and Irma fished frequently, sometimes daily, usually locally but often on trips elsewhere in the country where they would hire a guide, one of whom they returned to visit for decades. Simmons and Irma would release

the fish they caught, except for a couple of the largest (allegedly that *he* had caught) that were immortalized in Simmons' office. A rite of passage for many residents and fellows was an invitation from Simmons to fish with him, alone on the water for hours just talking about anything and everything except the field of Medicine. Such expeditions produced widely different results, sometimes supporting Simmons' oft-stated prowess on the water while other times invoking some environmental reason to explain why "the fish were not biting today". Regardless of the experience, Simmons thereafter would bring his guests to the same local spot for a wonderful "down home" breakfast. Even trainees who never fished or did not like to fish aspired for this invitation.

Simmons loved his wife, with whom he shared 59 years, and his sons. His quiet sentimentality was best exemplified by the watch that he wore daily until his death that was memorialized with the date that he met Irma. Simmons was pre-deceased by Irma who died in 2014, and by one son who died in 1977. Simmons was survived by three sons (Miller, Newell and Ephraim), a sister (Florence Jaffe), and four grandchildren (Etai and Omer Lavie, and Griffin and Fiona Lessell).

Respectfully submitted,

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