



Charles McCabe



Dr. Charles McCabe, senior surgeon and senior physician in Emergency Services at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School, died July 7th 2008 after a protracted battle with melanoma, lymphoma and multiple sclerosis. He was 60 years of age.

“CJ,” “Charlie” or “Doc”, as he was known by all of those who loved him, was born on February 10, 1948 in Asbury Park, New Jersey. A phenomenal athlete, he played football, basketball and baseball in high school before entering the University of Notre Dame, graduating in 1970. He then returned to New Jersey for his medical degree, graduating from the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in 1974 having decided on a career in surgery. His wife, Rose, explains that one of the happiest days of his life was when he learned that he had matched for the surgical residency at Massachusetts General Hospital; he entered his surgical residency in 1974 and proceeded to enter the cardiothoracic training program at the same hospital. On the cusp of graduation, illness - in the

shape of multiple sclerosis – forced him to accept a different calling; that of teaching to medical students and residents the science, the art and the humanity of surgery. For the next 30 years, he immersed himself in this teaching to become the icon that – for many residents and students – formulated and shaped their surgical careers.

He soon became a fixture in the MGH Emergency Department. Surgical residents performing their Emergency Department rotations and medical students (from Harvard Medical School and beyond) would come to “McCabe Rounds”, held in the MGH ED every morning at 6 AM, to go over the surgical cases that had been seen in the previous 24 hours. On every case he had a teaching point; sometimes it was

the nature of the presentation of the surgical case; sometimes it was a point of operative technique or a discussion of the surgical complications. He considered every patient unique and that within every patient- physician interaction there was an opportunity for learning.

He became the quintessential teacher of surgery at Harvard Medical School and for many future leaders of surgery he was their first mentor. Medical students returned his affection; he was named the Harvard Medical School Teacher of the Year on several occasions. Dr Daniel Federman, the Carl W. Walter Distinguished Professor of Medicine and former Dean for Alumni Relations and Clinical Teaching at the Medical School said of Dr. McCabe, “He was the spokesman for surgical excellence in his teaching of students and residents.” and added that the school created a special faculty prize for sustained excellence in teaching, because he won - or was nominated for - awards so often.

Charlie loved the MGH – it was his second home. He knew everyone in the hospital and would always provide a word of encouragement to those in need. He was especially fond of his colleagues in the Police and Security Department at the hospital, as well as the EMS paramedics and EMT’s. They would always stop by his office after they had delivered a patient to the Emergency Department. Due to this interest, he became the State Medical Director for Massachusetts from 1983 to 1992 overseeing a dramatic growth in the scope and importance of the pre-hospital arena within the Commonwealth. His contributions and involvement led to the initiation of an annual award given by the State to the physician who has made the most outstanding contribution to Massachusetts EMS –the McCabe Award.

He remained active clinically throughout his career; and even when his disability became severe, he would be seen in his wheelchair providing advice and counsel to the MGH ED faculty. Charlie was one of those mature physicians who had “seen it all;” and both junior and senior faculty would seek him out when facing particularly challenging cases.

Charlie was a prodigious reader and writer. He was on the editorial board of several journals and every edition of the Journal of Emergency Medicine had “Pearls from the Literature” – a précis of new developments and papers that he knew were important for the practicing clinician. One could be certain that he had read all of the articles that he quoted; and you could be sure that he would only quote articles that were academically accurate and clinically important.

But even more than his professional accomplishments, Charlie was a humanitarian:

“It’s a beautiful day.”

When anyone asked Dr. Charles McCabe how he was feeling, he always answered with that unique phrase. His optimism was contagious and he was quick to remind all that life was a precious gift that should be enjoyed to the fullest. He was a realist and – much more than he ever let his friends know – understood when the end was near. Typical for Charlie - he organized his own farewell. At the time of his last hospitalization, he summoned his colleagues and friends to his room to bid them farewell over his last few days. He insisted that at his memorial service, everyone was to wear bright and pastel colors; it was to be a celebration of life and not of his passing. We all attended as he wished; the church was packed and the crowd overflowed into the street - the street had to be closed. The celebration of his life was everything that Charlie would wish it to be.

He leaves behind his wife of 37 years, Rose, and his daughter, Krista. He also leaves his two sisters, Charlene and Marybeth, and his brother, Jay.

Respectfully submitted,

Alasdair Conn, *Chairperson*

William Coleman

Charles Ferguson