

Obituary



Harold E. Kleinert, MD, FACS

The end of an era

Dr. Harold E. Kleinert, the great teacher and an iconic figure in the world of Hand Surgery left for his heavenly abode on the night of September 28, 2013. He survived a bad fall a week ago, but following surgery to repair multiple fractures the end came quietly. The Guru to many leading lights of hand surgery championed the cause teaching the highest standards of hand care and propagating his wisdom to his innumerable fellows and trainees.

Dr. Kleinert was a Emeritus Clinical Professor of Surgery at the University of Louisville and at Indiana University-Purdue University and served as President of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand in 1976. He was the recipient of the Scientific Achievement Award from the American Medical Association in 1980. Dr. Kleinert was appointed a National Consultant in Hand Surgery to the Surgeon General, United States Air Force in 1973. He authored more than 200 scientific publications.

Dr. Kleinert graduated from Temple University Medical School in 1946 and received its Distinguished Alumni Scientific Achievement Award in Surgery in 1987. His postgraduate training was completed at Grace Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. Dr. Kleinert arrived in Louisville, Kentucky in the early 1950s as an instructor in the University of Louisville Medical School. He quickly moved into hand surgery and realized that it was an untapped specialty. In fact, at the time, only two practices in the U.S. (one in Chicago and one in California) had any reputation for operating on hands. Elsewhere, Dr. Kleinert saw that this work usually fell to

the youngest resident who, as he put it “would take the injured hand to the operating room, where there was an anatomy book. You would turn the page to the hand and go to work. That was the extent of hand surgery.”

Dr. Kleinert founded the University of Louisville Hand Clinic in 1953 for comprehensive care of hand patients. He planned to run it for two years and then move to his native state Montana. As luck would have it, he stayed on and the rest is history! In 1960, the Christine M. Kleinert Fellowship in Hand Surgery was established for those residents desiring postgraduate training. During the same time a young surgeon, Dr. Joseph Kutz was applying for residency and as the cardiovascular fellowship was unpaid and he had a wife and kids at home, he joined the Hand fellowship offered by Kleinert. After completion of the fellowship he had earned the trust of Kleinert and he asked him to stay on. That was 1964 and since then they spent the better part of next 50 years revolutionizing hand surgery together. Working from downtown Louisville, they achieved numerous firsts including the first hand transplant in the U.S and many such unique feats in the field of hand care. They introduced new techniques, repaired injuries once thought un-salvageable and built the largest, most respected training ground for hand surgeons in the world. The duo had been responsible for training over 1200 surgeons from 51 countries including many from India and they all have proceeded to become the pioneers in Hand Surgery in their own countries.

Reaching even more people, Dr. Kleinert traveled the world to lecture, operate and interact with students. He operated in nearly every country in the world. He once wondered “Not bad for a guy from Montana who, at 12, wondered if he’d ever see the ocean.” His fame crossed many oceans and his fellows will continue to celebrate his life and work in all corners of the world!

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Dr. Klinert honoured the Indian Society of Surgery of the Hand by attending its Conference in Coimbatore and offering his pearls of wisdom to the next generation of hand surgeons in India. A teacher / guru is one whose vision of education is not limited to the tangibles of academic achievement but encompasses daily doses of compassion, flexibility, communication, humor, imagination, and the willingness to be open minded. Most importantly, a good teacher is someone who uses both his head and his heart in equal measure, has compassion in his understanding and always prepared to offer a little extra attention. In Dr. Klinert we were privileged to have such an excellent teacher.

In his demise the world of Hand Surgery has today lost its father figure and feels orphaned. He will be missed not only by his friends and family but by all his students and trainees and mostly by his innumerable patients, who still earn their livelihood with the hand he so meticulously repaired and gave back to them! May his soul rest in peace!

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