



James Hissom Nelson, Jr., MD
October 5, 2010

Jim Nelson, Jr., M.D., born in Marietta, Ohio, died in Charleston, South Carolina, at the age of 84 years after a long illness. He is survived by his wife, Noreen Nelson, M.D., his son, Dr. James Nelson, and grandsons James and Matthew Nelson.

Dr. Nelson entered the U.S. Navy during World War II at the age of 18 years, served in the Pacific, and after the war graduated from Marietta College, Marietta, OH with a B.S. and from New York University Medical School in New York city via a Navy Sponsorship. He interned and completed a residency at St. Albans Naval Hospital (Queens, NY) in Obstetrics and Gynecology and served as a Naval Attending Physician at St. Albans until 1961, when he was discharged from active duty as a Lt. Commander.

While still in training, Dr. Nelson had arranged a Special Fellowship in Gynecologic Oncology at Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, under the aegis of Dr. Louis Hellman, and was swiftly appointed instructor at Downstate after leaving the Navy to start a more "formal" fellowship in Gynecologic Oncology in 1961. This anteceded the formal recognition of this sub-specialty by more than a decade. After one year of such training, he was accepted as a Fellow in Medicine (Cancer and Chemotherapy Division) at Memorial Hospital in New York, with a simultaneous appointment as a Research Fellow at the Sloan-Kettering Research Institute. Although he returned to Downstate for a final year of training, he continued as a Visiting Investigator at the Sloan-Kettering Research institute for five years.

This background stimulated Dr. Nelson to introduce, with Dr. J.G. Masterson, the use of chemotherapy in the treatment of ovarian cancer, thus extending life and even producing some cures in patients with what was in 1965-1970 an almost uniformly fatal disease. Based on the Downstate experience, alkylating chemotherapy was widely adopted and the quest for new agents was accelerated. He also pioneered the wider application of arteriography and venography in gynecologic oncology patients, studied the thymolymphatic system, and persuaded Dr. Hervy Averette to join him in extending lymphadenectomies during radical surgery to the aortic chains, ultimately performing staging laparotomies prior to treatment in patients with cervical cancer. With other pelvic surgeons of this era, Dr. Nelson demonstrated the importance of initial cytoreduction in the treatment of ovarian cancer, and was able to stratify virulence indices in patients with pre-invasive cervical neoplasia in an era ignorant of the influence of the Human Papilloma Virus.

Dr. Nelson was quickly promoted to Professorial Rank at Downstate Medical Center, appointed Director of the Division of the "Gynecological Tumor Service" and six years later, in 1970, was promoted to the Chair, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, State University of New York, Downstate Medical Center. After another six years he was appointed as the Joe V. Meigs Professor of Gynecology, Harvard Medical School (Boston, MA), and Director of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Massachusetts General Hospital, also in Boston. He held these positions until he was made Emeritus after 10 years of distinguished service in 1986. Dr. Nelson then spent two years as Director of Gynecologic Oncology at the University of Cincinnati, returning to the New York area as Director of the Division of Gynecologic

Oncology at New York Medical College, and finally, as Chief Obstetrician-Gynecologist at Stamford Hospital in Stamford Connecticut.

In addition to his academic accomplishments, Dr. Nelson's leadership in improving women's health can be inferred from his service as President of the Brooklyn Gynecological Society President of the New York Obstetrical Society, Founding Member and President of the Society of Gynecologic Oncologists, leadership in the Society of Pelvic Surgeons, one of five appointed members of the Ad Hoc Committee for Development of advanced Certification in Gynecologic Oncology, National Board Member American Cancer Society, and numerous positions of service to American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the American College of Surgeons.

Dr. Nelson managed a full and complex life in a special era in American medicine. He seized and solved problems on a clinical level; shared his observations and his friendship freely; and by virtue of inquiry and effort, he was able to enjoy the introduction of molecular intra-cell conversation. His contributions have been important and his template is instructive for those who follow.

Submitted by Carmel J. Cohen, MD