

Matthew Kirkendall's Eulogy of Walter Murray Kirkendall

**Delivered during Memorial Service for Walter Murray Kirkendall, M.D.
July 18, 1991
University of Texas Medical School
Houston, Texas**

Dr. Ribble and Dr. Willerson:

My family is honored to be with the University of Texas Medical community today to share our sorrow at the death of Dr. Kirkendall.

You all were very important to him and in truth represented an extended family for him - bound by his love for the practice of medicine.

He had a productive life with a medical career that spanned 50 years and gained a national reputation for clinical and academic excellence. Many of you helped him in his work and share in his accomplishments.

I've talked to so many of you over the last several days and thank you for your condolences and kindness to our family. I was struck, though, by how often it was personal interaction with him that was so important. Ward service together, committee assignments, discussion of a problem, or just a joke in the hallway — many such events over months and years established for you individually many of his endearing qualities. So many of you noted that you would just stop in on a regular basis to exchange ideas.

His office was on the first floor and his door was always open. This kind of activity gives the school its life and soul.

I'd like to share some memories of Dr. Kirkendall with you.

He was born in Louisville, Kentucky and supposedly obtained his demanding nature and southern charm from his mother, one of the Caplinger girls who were notorious Southern belles of the day. These women were known for a series of Byzantine-like feuds where one or another wouldn't talk for months at a time. Walter noted that while growing up he often wouldn't know which aunt he was officially allowed to talk. All of this may have prepared him for the intricate politics of a career in academic medicine. But he preferred cooperation rather than confrontation. Many of you noted to me that he seemed to be a man without enemies and above criticism.

He went to the University of Louisville Medical School and this provided the only deep, dark secret I know about him - in that he planned to become a surgeon. It was the needs of the U. S. Army which determined his career as an internist.

He served in North Africa and Italy with distinction during World War II. His medical citation noted his organization of a field hospital provided excellent medical care with limited supplies and became the model for such facilities in the entire theatre. He was always quite reticent about his wartime service and never gave many details. However he did note that a portrayal of General Patton in one movie was "too nice to the S.O.B."

He came to the University of Iowa after the war to finish his medical residency. It was during this time that he met Margaret Allen who was an R.N. at the university hospital. Apparently, their relationship developed slowly, Dad had the reputation of being rather the General Patton of the medicine wards. The courtship was marked by a series of fits and starts with Margaret vowing more than once to be done with the 30 year old spoiled, confirmed bachelor. Thankfully, for myself and my 9 brothers and sisters, things finally worked out. The marriage they developed over 43 years was marked by profound love and respect. Margaret was supportive and a partner in all his accomplishments and endeavors. Woe unto the poor person who implies to Margaret Kirkendall that a housewife and mother is not a career woman.

He was always very competitive and loved to challenge someone. A patient evaluation was part of the Internal Medicine board exam at that time. Dr. Kirkendall drew a patient with dyspnea reportedly from COPD, which had been diagnosed by several dozen examiners prior to that time. Walter disagreed with that diagnosis and found mitral stenosis instead. His examiner could not hear a murmur, but he was a gastroenterologist who had access to the correct diagnosis, but felt unsure of himself when confronted by the self-assured candidate. He asked another examiner, a cardiologist, his opinion, who agreed with the diagnosis of mitral stenosis. So was started the legend, soon to become the bane of a generation of medical students, residents and fellows of Dr. Kirkendall's preeminence at physical diagnosis.

Through his life, Dr. Kirkendall received many awards and honors. Those that he cherished the most were the teaching awards he received from his students. It is so appropriate that he should be remembered as a teacher. He so often tried to impart not just medical information to students but some of his joy and enthusiasm in the practice of medicine. Admittedly, this could be painful at times — such as trying to commit large tracts of Debocolin and DeGowin physical diagnosis to memory. But he also tried to foster curiosity — to instill the need to research a problem because so much of medicine has to be self-taught and the need to reeducate oneself never ends.

He had rigid standards — but then his predominate concern was for competent patient care. He always had great compassion for his patients and felt whatever their background or means, they were due his best effects. A patient had come to pay his respects and when asked what he remembered best about Walter he said "he's my

doctor who'd do just about anything to keep me well." A fitting epitaph for any physician.

Another physician when surveying Walter's life noted that he had always been a builder, that each place he went he would build a foundation and not an empire. Each institution would have a chance to grow and develop. It was this urge to build which attracted him to Houston and the University of Texas — to help create a new medical school, one without limitations that with work and care might become one of the preeminent schools in the country — this challenge continued to simulate him. Margaret had long ago given up hope that he might retire one day, but took solace in knowing every day he was happy and doing what he wanted and loved to do.

My Father's death has left a great void in our family. It is a period of transition for us, but also for you. Walter knew better than most that things change — he always sought to grow in his life, for if you didn't, you risked stagnation.

But he exhibited qualities that helped him deal with new situations and these should be important to us in our personal and professional lives:

Kindness and honesty.

Compassion to patients and loyalty to friends, and always an insatiable curiosity.

He leaves us challenges — that as physicians, nurses, and medical personnel, we strive always to improve patient care and as colleagues we make a commitment to continue to build this university.

Try to hold his memory with us.

In the library or in the hall when you pass his old office — remember his door was always open.

Dr. Walter M. Kirkendall: husband, father, physician, teacher, friend.