Obituary
CLAUDE C. COLEMAN
1879–1953

Dr. Claude C. Coleman, one of the pioneers in the development of neurological surgery in this country, died in Richmond on January 9th, 1953, at the age of 73. He was born in Caroline County, Virginia on July 21st, 1879, the son of the late Frank and Jane Patrick Coleman. His early years were spent there. In 1898, after two years at William and Mary College, he taught in a country school on the Eastern Shore of Virginia for the ensuing two years and then proceeded to the Medical College of Virginia, from which he was graduated in 1903. For the next decade he pursued postgraduate training in surgery in New York and in Richmond, and during this period he was also engaged in the general practice of medicine in Buena Vista,
Virginia from 1905 to 1909. In 1913 Dr. Coleman began the practice of surgery in Richmond and soon had a wide and diversified general surgical practice. He had long had a special interest in plastic and oral surgery, and—to the end of his surgical career—he liked nothing better than to repair harelips and cleft palates.

During or just before World War I, Dr. Coleman's interests turned toward neurological surgery. He was chief of the brain surgery school at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia at this time and later did extensive work in peripheral nerve surgery, operating in innumerable cases of nerve injuries which were chiefly casualties of the war in France. In 1919 he was associated with the late Dr. Charles H. Frazier in a military hospital in Cape May, New Jersey, and he also worked in a similar institution in Staten Island, New York.

Returning to Richmond during the latter part of 1919, Dr. Coleman began his most significant surgical achievement as organizer and director of the Department of Neurological Surgery at the Medical College of Virginia. Here he was to carry on his work as Professor of Neurological Surgery for thirty-two years until in 1951 he retired as director of the department and became Neurosurgical Consultant to the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals, a position he retained until his death. During this period, at the request of the Dean of the medical school, he also organized a department of neurological surgery at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and served as Clinical Professor of Neurological Surgery there from 1937 to 1941, simultaneously with his work in Richmond. He thus realized his long-felt desire to establish departments of neurological surgery in the two medical schools of Virginia. In all, he held four full professorships, for in 1912 he was elected Professor of the Principles of Surgery, and in 1913, Professor of Oral Surgery and Anesthesia, both at the Medical College of Virginia. At the time of his retirement from active surgical practice in 1951, Dr. Coleman had taught a total of forty-four years in public and private schools, and in medical schools.

He was a member of most of the leading surgical and neurological societies in this country, including the Society of Neurological Surgeons, of which he was President in 1929, the American Neurological Association, the Southern Surgical Association, the American College of Surgeons, the Seaboard, Norfolk and Western, of which he had also been President, and Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Surgeons' Associations, the Southeastern Surgical Congress, the American Medical Association, the Medical Society of Virginia, and the Richmond Academy of Medicine, of which he was President in 1925. In 1943 he was elected an honorary member of the Harvey Cushing Society.

In his later years, many well-deserved honors came to Dr. Coleman. He was appointed to the Board of Visitors of William and Mary College on April 24th, 1941 and served on that Board until 1950. He also received the Alumni Award from that school on June 7th, 1941. He was awarded the honorary degree of Sc.D. from William and Mary College in 1949. The honorary degree of Sc.D. was also conferred upon Dr. Coleman by his medical Alma Mater in June 1951. He was a member of the Founders' Group of the American Board of Surgery and served as an examiner for the American Board of Neurological Surgery from its inception in 1940 to 1949.

In World War II he served as Civilian Consultant in Neurological Surgery to the Surgeon General, and from 1946 to 1953 he was Neurosurgical Consultant to the Special Medical Advisory Group of the Veterans Administration, which met at frequent intervals in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps his happiest and proudest moment was in May 1949, when all his former
neurosurgical residents—many in prominent posts throughout the country—
asssembled at the Medical College of Virginia for a celebration in honor of the com-
pletion of his thirtieth year as Director of Neurological Surgery. A number of his own
neurosurgical contemporaries from Boston, Baltimore, San Francisco and the Mayo
Clinic also attended this meeting. In September 1951, his former and present resi-
dents presented his portrait to the Medical College of Virginia at an impressive
ceremony in the Baruch Auditorium.

His medical writings were models of clarity and simple yet forceful language, as
shown both in his published papers and addresses, and also in the several sections
that he contributed to various volumes and systems of surgery. His achievements in
the diagnosis and treatment of injuries to the head, spine and peripheral nerves were
outstanding and will probably be considered in future years to have constituted his
major medical contributions, together with his clarification of facial nerve lesions of
all types. His excellent results in the treatment of brain abscess, brain tumor,
Ménière’s disease, and many other neurosurgical lesions are also well known.

To have known Dr. Coleman, even briefly, was an unforgettable, unique and
rewarding experience. His sincerity and his integrity inspired loyalty and devotion
in his residents and medical colleagues, and in his patients. He had an infectious
sense of humor and was a raconteur of more than ordinary talent. His unique man-
nerisms and anecdotes of his effective methods for dealing with patients and other
individuals are already both legion and legendary and are fondly and reminiscently
discussed whenever his former associates, residents or internes gather together. His
unusual diagnostic skill, his operative boldness or conservatism, as the individual
case demanded, the general excellence of his surgical judgment, and the end results
of his operations, coupled with genuine interest and keen insight in his patients’ in-
dividual problems were, perhaps, his chief characteristics throughout his surgical
career—a rare combination of both scientific acumen and humanitarianism. Also to
be mentioned was his constant interest in his residents, not only while they were
under his tutelage but afterward as well. Truly, like Osler, Dr. Coleman was the
“Young Man’s Friend” and he helped to further their careers whenever possible.

Dr. Coleman was married three times. In 1917 he married Julia Langhorne Cone
and to them were born four children, three daughters and a son, his namesake, who
is following in the footsteps of his distinguished father in pursuing a medical career.
His first wife died in 1927, and in 1932 he married Ruth Threadcraft Putney, who
died in 1945. In 1948 he married Constance Gooding Cardozo, who survives him,
together with his four children, three stepsons and seven grandchildren.

There should finally be included in this note the tributes of Virginia’s two dis-
tinguished United States Senators. At the time of Dr. Coleman’s death, Senator A.
Willis Robertson, his friend since early manhood when they were both practicing, the
one law, the other medicine, in Buena Vista, Virginia, telegraphed the family: “Dr.
Coleman’s eminence in his profession was due primarily to two factors, first, an un-
usual and extraordinary capacity for friendship, combined with the excellent and
outstanding quality of his professional work.” And perhaps there could be no better
eulogy than the tribute of Senator Harry F. Byrd on the occasion of the celebration
in 1949 toward the close of Dr. Coleman’s notable surgical career—“... he is the
personification of all those qualities that make our nation great.”

J. M. MEREDITH, M.D.