OBITUARY
John Anthony Jane Sr., MD, PhD, 1931–2015

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Surrounded by his family, at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, Dr. John Anthony Jane Sr., MD, PhD, died on September 18, 2015. He served for many years as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at the University of Virginia and Editor-in-Chief (EIC) of the Journal of Neurosurgery Publishing Group (JNSPG). He had a profound impact on the specialty of neurosurgery and on all of those who were fortunate enough to know him and work with him (Fig. 1).

John was born September 21, 1931, and grew up in Chicago, Illinois. His parents inculcated in him a love of athletics and academics. He attended the University of Chicago from 1947 to 1951 for his undergraduate education, and later the University of Chicago School of Medicine from 1952 to 1956, where he received his medical degree. The traditions of scholarship and intellectual achievement, which are part of the fabric of the University of Chicago, had a longstanding effect on John. Several of his children and grandchildren have also attended the University of Chicago. John’s training in neurosurgery and research was rich, varied, and had multiple phases. At the University of Chicago, the Royal Victoria Hospital/McGill University, the Illinois Neuropsychiatric Institute, the Atkinson Morley Hospital in London, and Duke University, John was exposed to Paul Bucy, Oscar Sugar, Wilder Penfield, Sir Wylie McKissock, and Irving Diamond among others. He was awarded the PhD in physiological psychology from the University of Chicago in 1967. His multifaceted training and preparation to become a surgeon and scientist led him to later appreciate the value of creativity, innovation, and exposure to multiple “schools” of neurosurgery for the educational paradigms he would recommend for those who trained with him.

John’s first faculty appointment as a neurosurgeon was in 1965 at Case Western Reserve University. The personal and professional associations he made there would serve as a foundation for his career for the rest of his life.

In 1969 John became the Alumni Professor and Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, where, between 1987 and 2006, he was the David D. Weaver Professor and Chairman. John thought that being the “P & C” was the highest achievement a neurosurgeon could attain, and he achieved this milestone at the young age of 38. He succeeded Dr. Gayle Crutchfield, and, although the job was prestigious, the department was in need of fundamental restructuring. John was able to build the department according to his own vision over the next 37 years. During his tenure as professor and chairman, John was able to profoundly influence the careers of more than 80 residents, as well as...
numerous faculty members at the University of Virginia. He was responsible for training a large number of people who would go on to be neurosurgery department chairs, professors, and faculty members at some of the nation’s top academic medical centers. John built the program almost exclusively on the basis of his intellect and personal skills. He frequently expressed his pride in hiring “good people.” John excelled in four roles to build his great department: as a surgeon, as a teacher, as an innovator, and as the leader of his “neurosurgical family.”

The Surgeon

John established himself as the ultimate master surgeon. The culture of his department emphasized that you could not profess to know something special about the craft of neurosurgery unless you were an expert yourself in actually doing it. His voracious appetite for clinical work infected his fellow faculty and residents. His credibility as a surgeon set a high standard for all of the clinical and scholarly work that occurred around him for years to come. He built a huge clinical practice by always saying “yes” when referring doctors would call for help. If a patient was referred with right upper quadrant pain and fever, John would accept the patient without question and sort it out later so as to be of assistance to the referring doctor. John would accept any neurosurgical patient, those with aneurysms, all types of brain tumors, spinal trauma, degenerative disease, and pediatric neurosurgical conditions. John would enthusiastically manage and see a large number of patients from around the world, and he developed his own style of managing common disorders like cervical disc/osteophyte disease and spinal stenosis. In addition to being a consummate “general” neurosurgeon, John developed subspecialty expertise in a number of special surgical conditions and procedures. With colleagues in plastic surgery, he accrued significant experience with craniofacial disorders, including Crouzon’s syndrome, Apert’s syndrome, and craniosynostosis. Through this experience, he developed the insight to generate one of the first descriptions of supraorbital craniotomies and craniotomies via the frontal sinus. Related expertise managing esthesioneuroblastoma grew out of collaboration with otolaryngologists. John was an exemplary surgical teacher. He would always give his residents the appropriate level of autonomy and guidance.

The Teacher

John constantly demonstrated a love of creating and acquiring new knowledge. His love of books, history, and ideas is well known to everyone whose life he touched. What was unusual was his ability to extend his “life of the mind” into the process of his own personal development as a neurosurgeon and educator. By exposing all of us to the hard work of cramming facts and concepts into our heads, John motivated us and encouraged us, as only a master could do. He enabled us to see our own identities, defined by our ability to be like him. His intellectual approach to learning and teaching was based on the traditions he experienced at the University of Chicago during his earlier years there. His PhD training in physiological psychology led to a deep interest in comparative neuroanatomy. His scholarly work on the corticothalamic projections, the corticospinal tract, and the visual system in hedgehogs, tree shrews, opossums, sharks, and humans was well known to his colleagues. His trainees marveled at the intensity of his interest and his ability to communicate his enthusiasm for investigation and knowledge acquisition to them. He learned early on that academic neurosurgeons are strengthened by preparation and by exposure to multiple teachers and mentors. John’s work with Irving Diamond, Alan Richardson, Sir Wylie McKissock, and others formed a foundation that he used to inspire his trainees academically. He was a leader in using international comparative neurosurgical residency education in England and in New Zealand to bolster the training of his residents. John understood and demonstrated the benefits of optimal levels of supervision and the “international surgical parallax” on the development of young neurosurgeons. He organized “Sunday School” at his home where he generously devoted his free time on the weekends to inspire residents to become expert neuroanatomists and learn the other knowledge foundations of our specialty. All of his trainees have fond memories of these inspiring sessions; it was as if he were focusing his teaching on you, one-on-one. We all learned by watching him. His thirst for knowledge was evident, and he transmitted his enthusiasm for learning to everyone who surrounded him.

The Innovator

In his department John constantly stressed the importance of creativity and relentless innovation as essential conditions for progress in our specialty. No crazy idea generated by his residents or faculty was off limits, and he always encouraged new, unconventional ideas and thoughts. This would be called “disruptive innovation” today, but years before that term was coined, John was practicing it systematically in his department. This enthusiasm for new concepts and procedures motivated all to expand their conceptual and technical boundaries, accelerating the growth and development of his colleagues. For example, John had an exceptionally creative approach to craniosynostosis and craniofacial deformities. He championed the early immediate correction of sagittal synostosis with the “Pi procedure.”3 His aggressive approach to coronal synostosis—gleaned from his extensive experience with orbital rim advancement in managing Crouzon’s and Apert’s syndrome—was innovative and had a major impact on the field. He was one of the first neurosurgeons to make use of the orbitozygomatic osteotomy in managing basal tumors and other lesions.4 Throughout the years that he led the department of neurosurgery, John constantly encouraged his trainees and faculty to innovate and to set new courses for investigation and clinical care. He was a master at establishing productive interfaces between neurosurgery and other disciplines. He would systematically reach out to plastic surgeons, otolaryngologists, orthopedic surgeons,
neuroanesthesiologists, and colleagues in other disciplines to develop new ways of caring for neurosurgical patients. He established robust scientific relationships with specialists in infectious disease to study nervous system infections; worked with experts in the renin-angiotensin system to study the pathogenesis of hypertension caused by compression of the nucleus tractus solitarius in experimental animals; and started the liaison with endocrinology that led to the later establishment of the distinguished combined Pituitary Center at the University of Virginia. At a time when some neurosurgeons developed an insular approach to patient care, John taught by example all those around him in the department to be open-minded, polite, professional, and collaborative with colleagues from other scientific and clinical disciplines.

The Leader/Family Man

John created an academic neurosurgical “family” in which all department members were accepted if they abided by the core principles of working extremely hard and exhibiting loyalty to the common cause. He used his great intellect, his prodigious sense of humor, and his profound aequanimitas to establish an esprit de corps in his department that stood as a shining example. From the beginning there was always an understanding of the unspoken reciprocal responsibilities between the “P & C” and the rest of us in the department. Misssteps were tolerated, but we all wanted to live up to John’s standards, and we all became better for it. He used the lessons outlined in A Message to Garcia by Elbert Hubbard2 to emphasize the importance of young surgeons efficiently identifying their patients’ problems and then taking the personal initiative to solve them promptly. He advocated a “tight-loose” approach: Humor and laughter were common but no one wanted to disappoint him by failing to live up to his very serious expectations. He was gifted in being able to use humor to lighten a tense moment or to further secure the bond between himself and his coworkers and trainees. His extensive network of friends from Canada, Chicago, Cleveland, the NIH, and England would cycle in and out of Charlottesville to create a dispersed community of his followers. The social events always included parties hosted at his home, imprinting on us a neurosurgical way of life, tying together our professional and personal lives. John and his wife Noella were always the most gracious hosts. We all felt that we were part of something larger than a small medical school department. It was a group of intellectually stimulated surgeons and scientists who, although quite diverse, were joined together by their association with John. As his trainees began to populate many academic centers around the country, individuals came to look on themselves as his neurosurgical brothers, sisters, cousins, and grandchildren. It was, in effect, an extended family defined by the connection to John. Most of his trainees felt as though their association with him was the major determining factor responsible for success in their careers.

The Editor-in-Chief

In 1984 John was elected to the Editorial Board of the Journal of Neurosurgery. Thus began his 32-year-long formal association with the Journal. From the beginning it was clear to everyone who knew him that the Journal was one of the most important gifts in his life. He worked closely with the EICs, Dr. William Collins and Dr. Thoralf Sundt. When Dr. Sundt died in 1992, John was chosen to succeed him. I believe that Dr. Sundt knew that he could entrust his beloved Journal to John’s capable hands because of the personal and professional qualities that John had demonstrated in his life. Dr. Sundt knew that only a surgeon with great credibility as a technical surgeon and academic leader could lead our specialty as EIC of the Journal. John’s selection as EIC was also recognition of his great bibliophilia, his love of learning, his creativity, and his commitment to achievement. A better match for the job of EIC would not have been possible. John encouraged his residents and fellows to write scientific articles, often assisting them in the research and actual writing and preparation of the manuscript. He also involved residents and other members of the department in the peer-review process as a learning opportunity.

Recognizing the vital role of subspecialty expertise in spinal and in pediatric neurosurgery, John established the Journal of Neurosurgery: Spine (in 1999) and Journal of Neurosurgery: Pediatrics (in 2004). These innovations were controversial but proved to be indicators of John’s prescient insight in bringing our field together. John endorsed the Journal’s electronic publishing endeavors through the formation of Neurosurgical Focus (in 1996), the brainchild of his great friend, Dr. Martin Weiss. John was an innovative leader of the Journal especially in modernizing its infrastructure and procedures, but he valued highly the Journal’s traditions, including iterative peer review. It was of great importance to him that the Journal be seen as the ultimate authority in our specialty and the place where the best scientific work was evaluated and published. John took pride in hiring competent, capable, and dedicated staff to work with him in the Journal office. John’s competitive focus on having the Journal excel animated his interactions with his residents, faculty, and editorial board members, and he served as a forceful advocate for the Journal and its editorial independence. John was extremely pleased as he transitioned the leadership of the Journal in 2013 to his successor as EIC, Dr. James Rutka. Like Dr. Sundt, John recognized excellence when he saw it, and he knew that the Journal would be in great hands for years to come under Dr. Rutka’s leadership and guidance.

The people who benefited most from his enlightened stewardship of the JNSPG were neurosurgeons worldwide, our present and future patients, and all those who were fortunate to work with John in other capacities. He was able to combine the same creativity and innovation that he used to establish his department to implement a rigorous set of scientific standards in shepherding the JNSPG as EIC. He had a unique ability to uphold high standards of scholarship and at the same time establish a culture of experimentation and acceptance of new concepts. John used his incredible leadership skills and his ability to understand and influence people to create in the Journal the same kind of super-achieving team that he had established in his department. In my work as a department chairman and in some of our specialty’s professional organizations,
I have never encountered a leader with skills to match John’s in his way of generating effective results from a team of diverse people, and in completing complex tasks under pressure and to such an extremely high standard.

John received almost every award that neurosurgery has to offer. He would often say how embarrassed he was to receive them and that perhaps someone else deserved the award. Table 1 provides a summary of his most significant awards—some within neurosurgery, but many outside of the field.

Personal Life

John’s personal life was no less extraordinary than his professional life. He and Noella (née Fortier) have four children, eight grandchildren, and one great-grandson. John and Noella shared their home and family with members of the department for many years, hosting memorable parties and events. This close mixing of professional and personal lives resulted in his son, John Jane Jr., choosing to become a neurosurgeon. He is now a successful member of the Department of Neurosurgery at the University of Virginia. Two of the children, Jennie and John Jr., live in homes very close to John and Noella’s. John loved seeing, playing sports with, and interacting with his grandchildren, all the while managing his professional obligations. He never complained that there was not enough time. He would only say, “Give a job to a busy man in order to get it done.”

John loved to garden and took pride in his roses. Often he would return from a full day at the hospital, set down his bag at the front door of his home, and walk straight to his garden to prune the roses, listen to the birds, and immerse himself in nature. He would be in deep thought, surrounded by the roses, still working with his hands. The John Jane Rose was named in 2012, a gift from his former and current residents.

John was courageous, humble, and extremely gracious as he interacted with his coworkers and followers throughout his life but especially in his final year. When the people whose careers he helped to foster thought about and interacted with him, they were the better and stronger for it. His achievements as department chairman and EIC of the Journal of Neurosurgery inspired us all. For over 40 years he was a steady force for surgical excellence, outstanding scholarship, and visionary leadership. It was one of life’s greatest privileges to work with him as a resident in the department and as a member of the Editorial Board of the JNSPG. We will miss him, but he will never be far from our thoughts as we use what he taught us to take exceptional care of our patients and drive our great specialty forward. “Here’s the thing.” John Jane’s legacy will live on forever within us.

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Disclosure

The author reports no conflict of interest.