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O
n October 20, 1966, in his 80th year, death came suddenly to Doctor Byron Stookey, one of the most distinguished neurosurgeons of his time.

Byron Stookey was born on January 4, 1887, in Belleville, Illinois, the son of Dr. Lyman Polk and Louise Brumbaugh Stookey. After completing his schooling in Belleville and at the Morgan Park Academy in Chicago, he went to the University of Southern California where, in 1908, he received an A.B. degree; then to Harvard where he received an M.A. degree in Comparative Literature in 1909, and an M.D. degree in 1913. During his university years, he was a member of the Sigma Chi and Nu Sigma Nu fraternities. He later studied at the universities of Geneva, Vienna, and Berlin.

After interning at Boston City Hospital, Doctor Stookey, early in 1915, began the practice of surgery in Los Angeles, but he was troubled by the plight of the English people in their struggle with Germany. Before the year was out he applied for, and received, a commission as Captain in the British Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC); and he served with them, in Flanders, for nearly two years before the United States entered the war. While with the RAMC, he was attached to an orthopedic unit and, for a time, was an assistant to England’s great orthopedic surgeon—Sir Robert Jones. Here, he gained an experience unusual among neurosurgeons in the total rehabilitation of wounded extremities—where bones, joints, muscles, tendons and nerves had suffered injury. For at that time, as indeed today, the British orthopedic surgeons, as part of their care of wounds of the extremities, treated all the injuries to peripheral nerves; and here, Doctor Stookey was introduced to a field of neurological surgery which held his special interest throughout his entire career, and in which he became pre-eminent.

In April, 1917, on the very day that the United States entered World War I, Doctor Stookey requested an Honorable Discharge from the British Army so that he might serve with the American Armed Forces. This was granted and, immediately thereafter, he applied for and received a commission, as Major, in the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

Because of his expressed interest in the treatment of peripheral nerve injuries, Doctor Stookey was promptly sent by the Surgeon-General to study in the laboratory the anatomy and physiology of nerve regeneration with the great neuro-anatomist and physiologist, Professor Carl Huber, of the University of Michigan—an association which gave Doctor Stookey knowledge, exceptional among the surgeons of that time, of the fundamental principles involved in the repair and regeneration of injured nerves.

After spending approximately six months in Professor Huber’s anatomical laboratory, Doctor Stookey was assigned by the Surgeon-General to the U.S. Army School for Neurosurgeons which had been set up at the Neurological Institute in New York under the direction of Drs. Frederick Tilney, Charles A. Elsberg, and Benjamin Strong. After finishing that course of instruction, he was assigned to the U.S. Army General Hospital No. 2, located at Fort McHenry, Maryland, one of the largest Army hospitals in the country, as Chief of the Neurosurgical Service with 200 beds under his supervision. This was a great compliment to a young surgeon, carrying heavy responsibility, but providing Doctor Stookey with an exceptionally rich experience in the actual surgical treatment of peripheral nerve injuries and other neurosurgical problems.

During the two or three years immediately following conclusion of World War I and while still in his early thirties, Doctor Stookey devoted much time and energy to the writing of a book entitled Surgical and Mechanical Treatment of Peripheral Nerves which incorporated and correlated his broad and unique experiences in this field. His book was the first comprehensive textbook and reference book on the treatment of injuries of peripheral nerves to be published by an American author. Today it is a collector’s item.

In 1919, Doctor Stookey was appointed an Instructor in Neuro-Anatomy at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia
University. Thus began a relationship with Columbia which continued uninterrupted for the rest of his life, culminating in his appointment as Professor of Neurological Surgery, and Director of the Neurosurgical Service at the Neurological Institute in 1928. Later, after his retirement from active practice, he served as Professor Emeritus and Consultant at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center until his death. In 1953, Doctor Stookey received the Distinguished Service Medal of the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center on the occasion of the Center’s 25th Anniversary; and, in 1959, he was awarded an Sc.D. (Hon.) by Columbia University at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Neurological Institute.

Byron Stookey was a master surgeon— with superb technique, a keen and decisive mind, exceptional initiative and resourcefulness, great courage, and absolute integrity. He was probably the first neurosurgeon (1925) to perform craniotomy and removal of a brain tumor entirely under local anesthesia, and to use this form of anesthesia routinely for intracranial and spinal surgery. He was also among the very first American neurosurgeons to operate for cerebral tumors with patients in the sitting position, which greatly reduced venous bleeding, and postoperative mortality and morbidity.

In 1928, he published the first description of ruptured intervertebral discs (cervical), the clinical syndromes produced by them, and a series of cases with this condition successfully operated upon by him. In 1936, he developed, with an associate, an original operation for the treatment of obstructive hydrocephalus, known as “puncture of the lamina terminalis and floor of the third ventricle,” which has proven to be one of the best methods devised for treatment of that condition. His fundamental contributions over the years to the treatment of peripheral nerve and spinal injuries have been notable. He developed and extended the technique of hemi-laminectomy, credit for which he always scrupulously gave to his old friend and mentor, Dr. Alfred Taylor. He refined the surgical treatment of trigeminal neuralgia and, in 1959, with an associate, wrote a comprehensive text and reference book on that subject. In addition to the two books already mentioned, he contributed chapters on neurosurgical subjects for various “systems of surgery,” including one, with an associate, for the Military Surgical Manuals published in 1942 by the National Research Council for the Surgeons-General of the U. S. Army and U. S. Navy; and more than forty scientific papers on a wide variety of neurological and neurosurgical subjects.

Doctor Stookey was a member of numerous surgical, neurological, and neurosurgical societies. He was one of the founding members of the American Board of Neurological Surgery (1940), a member of the National Research Council (1942), Chairman of the Section of Neurology and Psychiatry of the New York Academy of Medicine (1932), President of the New York Neurological Society (1944), and President of the Society of Neurological Surgeons (1939).

As chief of the large, active, Neurosurgical Service at the Neurological Institute of New York, Doctor Stookey was outstanding. He ran a very “tight ship.” He personally examined every service (ward) patient with the resident and attending staffs present, and discussed each case freely and fully with the staff before subjecting any patient to surgery. He personally saw not only his private patients, but every ward patient on his service each morning before going to the operating room or to his office; and he visited them again every evening before leaving the hospital. His personal care, indeed actual “nursing,” of paralyzed patients was unforgettable and inspiring to his Resident and Attending staffs.

Byron Stookey was a magnificent teacher of young neurosurgeons. He was dedicated to the proposition that every neurosurgeon must be, in his own right, a trained and competent neurologist, not merely a surgical technician. He, personally, was a keen and astute clinical neurologist. He was an “intellectual disciplinarian” in the very best sense, but never demanded discipline of others which he did not require even more stringently from himself. He demanded from his staff the most detailed and precise collection of clinical data pertaining to every patient on his service, and the most critical and thoughtful analyses of that data before any treatment was undertaken. The young men who were fortunate to serve under Doctor Stookey, and wise enough to appreciate the
value to them of the intellectual discipline he imposed upon them, received training of inestimable value to them for the rest of their lives. These men were invariably grateful and devoted to him. He, in turn, always referred to them as his “boys,” was immensely loyal to them, and enjoyed the greatest satisfaction and pride in their achievements.

After his retirement from active surgery and teaching, Doctor Stookey continued to make notable contributions in a series of exceptionally fine historical essays, which included the early history of Kings College in the City of New York (later Columbia University) and the College of Physicians and Surgeons; the origin and growth of neurology and neurosurgery in New York City; the early years of the Neurological Institute of New York; and climaxed these with a meticulously documented and beautifully written book entitled “A History of Colonial Medical Education” which is destined to live on as an enduring classic in medical literature. Shortly before his death, he was made an honorary member of the Connecticut State Medical Society in recognition of his contributions in the history of early Connecticut medicine.

Byron Stookey was a man of commanding presence, a superb mind, and great personal charm. He fulfilled the “image” of the great surgeon and teacher. He enjoyed the company of friends and was extremely loyal to them. But, in his dedicated and busy life, he found little time for self-indulgence or the broad pursuits of leisure. To an unusual degree, his very rich life was bounded and completely filled by two great enduring loves—his work and his family.

Those who knew Byron Stookey as surgeon, teacher, and friend, join with those who knew him also as a loving husband and father to mourn his departure and honor his memory.

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