M. Stephen Mahaley, Jr., M.D., Ph.D., 1932–1992

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Moses Stephen (Steve) Mahaley, Jr., one of our most prominent nationally and internationally respected neurosurgeons and cancer researchers, died prematurely at his home in Maggie Valley, North Carolina, on March 8, 1992. During his illness he received letters and visits from many colleagues who held his accomplishments in high esteem, as well as from nurses, patients, former students, and friends who shared his interests in birding and hiking.

I knew Steve closely from both a personal and professional standpoint. I first met him in 1963 when I transferred to Duke University Medical School, at which time he was already one of the star students of two of the most eminent neurosurgeons in the country at that period — Dr. Barnes Woodhall, who ultimately became Dean of Duke University Medical School and Chancellor of the University, and Dr. Guy Odom, then Chief of Neurosurgery at Duke. Steve, a true son of the South, attended Charlotte College and Wake Forest College in North Carolina and graduated from Duke University with his M.D. in 1959. He had already developed an interest in neurosurgery by graduation, but that same year he obtained a Ph.D. as well, a practice that was to become a nationally prominent educational component of Duke. His successes led Dr. Woodhall and other senior administrators at Duke to formally develop one of the first M.D.-Ph.D. programs for training physician-scientists in the nation. Steve chose his Ph.D. work in anatomy because, at that time, he and Drs. Odom and Woodhall were performing some of the first arterial infusions of chemotherapy for brain tumors in the country.

Steve went on to complete an internship and residency in neurosurgery at Duke in 1965; during the research time of his residency, he won the prestigious Residency Research Award from the American Academy of Neurological Surgeons, the first of many awards that were to come to him during his career. He received numerous other national and international awards throughout his career. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Alpha Omega Alpha, and was very proud to be the founder and a member of the Odom-Woodhall legion, the group of eminent neurosurgeons who Drs. Odom and Woodhall trained. In 1985, he received the National Farber Award from the American Academy of Neurology for outstanding research in brain tumors. And finally, because he was a loyal supporter of his alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, he was extremely pleased when he received the Distinguished Alumnus Award in 1986, was elected to their Alumni Hall of Fame in 1991, and was given the Distinguished Service Award in 1991.

Steve rose rapidly through the ranks of academic medicine at Duke from Assistant Professor to Associate
Professor of Neurosurgery. At the time of Dr. Odom's retirement as Chief of the Division, Steve decided to venture out and establish a Division of Neurosurgery, which he did at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in 1977. During his 9-year tenure there, in addition to many research accomplishments, he developed that program into one of the outstanding training programs for young neurosurgeons in the United States. In 1986, having felt that he had achieved all that he could at Chapel Hill, Steve moved on to the University of Alabama at Birmingham where, again he took an established division and developed it into one of national prominence.

In 1989, Steve surprised everyone when he retired to Maggie Valley before the mandatory retirement age. Many of us thought he knew of his illness at that time. His wife Jane and I are convinced that that was not the case, and that personal reasons led to his retirement. He revealed many aspects of his personality when he explained, “You know, I have never done any of this for any of the glory or positions but to try to train young neurosurgeons and to improve diagnosis and treatment of brain tumors. The only thing left professionally for me, which probably would have come in time, would have been to be president of one of the other major neurosurgical societies and now, having some time to spend with my family in the mountains and write some books and still contribute as a consultant is much more important.”

Steve was extremely active in all of the national neurosurgical societies. To mention a few, he was President of the North Carolina Neurosurgical Society and the Southern Neurosurgical Society; he was Chairman of many committees of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS); he was a member, Secretary, and ultimately Chairman of the American Board of Neurological Surgery. He was on the editorial board of most of the neurosurgical journals in the country, including the Journal of Neurosurgery.

Steve Maahley was universally regarded with high esteem for his personal integrity, his compassionate care of patients, and his dedication to clinical investigation and training young people to carry on the fight against brain tumors after he was gone. I know of no one who succeeded in all spheres any better.

Two personal incidents serve to illustrate Steve's professional integrity, his lack of selfishness, and his desire simply to see the difficult problem of brain tumors solved. When I was at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and still a resident with Dr. Odom, I had begun research with a promising brain-tumor model that we thought would be helpful in learning more about treating patients. As a resident, however, I could not submit an NIH grant alone. Steve offered to work with me on the grant so that it could be submitted in his name as a Professor; when that was done, he let me direct the use of the funds from the grant as if they were totally my own. A second similar selfless act on Steve's part was the introduction he provided for me to the president of one of the major brain tumor research foundations. Many individuals would have jealously and closely guarded such a contact and used it to acquire funding for their own laboratories. Steve's first consideration was quality brain-tumor research. These efforts can be fully appreciated only when one considers how difficult it is for someone with the clinical and administrative responsibilities Steve had to maintain research funding. He was one of the few neurosurgeons nationally to maintain NIH, foundation, and industry funding for his work throughout his career. During the time he was at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Alabama, he continued to enter clinical studies in our Brain Tumor Center Grant at Duke University because he thought that all of us working together could accomplish more than any of us working alone.

Steve described his research interests in his curriculum vitae in one phrase: “the investigation and treatment of brain tumors.” He translated this desire as a physician-scientist into being an extremely passionate and caring physician who, in each of the places he practiced, attracted a large number of patients from all across the nation and even internationally. He was considered a doctor's doctor, and his patients deeply admired him. In addition to the numerous patients he cared for personally, he always maintained a large and well-organized research team investigating both clinical and basic aspects of brain-tumor biology aimed at improving diagnosis and treatment. His research accomplishments were the pioneering work in immunology and immunotherapy of brain tumors. He also developed many types of chemotherapy that gave high-quality remission for months, and occasionally years, to malignant brain-tumor patients. His Phase II studies were scientifically impeccable and credible, and because of his intellectual honesty, others considered them worthy of adopting and extending.

Steve took his responsibilities in training the future generation of clinical neurosurgeons as well as physician-scientists extremely seriously. He laid the foundation, both in his work and in that of his trainees, for truly significant advances in brain-tumor treatment to emerge in our lifetime, and especially within the lifetime of his children.

A prolific writer, Steve authored more than 165 high-quality, full-length papers, reviews, and chapters in scientific publications. Counting an abstract among "real publications" would have been intellectually dishonest to him (he was impeccable in his intellectual honesty). He did publish a large number of abstracts, made many presentations at national and international meetings, and was a visiting professor at most of the important universities in the country. In matters pertaining to authorship on publications, he was always more than generous in giving credit to his coworkers and never sought first or senior authorship when it was inappropriate. In fact, he often went in the direction of trying to advance the careers of others when he right-