

ARTICLE

DR. DENTON COOLEY 1920-2016



Reconciliation between Denton Cooley and Michael DeBakey in 2008 after 40 years of scientific rivalry. Photo from the Houston Chronicle web edition.

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Hospital de Clínicas. UBA 2016

One of the most important cardiovascular surgery pioneers died on November 18, 2016. Denton Cooley, the inspiration behind the career of thousands of surgeons around the world and in our country, passed away leaving us a mark difficult to remove.

In the media, he will be remembered as the first to implant an artificial heart in the world, although not everyone knows that the Argentine surgeon Domingo S. Liotta was the researcher and developer of the device actively participating in such moment. He was the first in the USA to perform a heart transplant in a human being. He was a contemporary of Michael DeBakey (1908-2008), who successfully disputed his position at Baylor College of Medicine and with whom there was the well-known rivalry that just enhanced the prestige of the specialization. The city of Houston became the world Mecca of cardiovascular surgery.

The Texas Heart Institute was the physical place created by him to develop his career, with thousands of publications, scientific advances, techniques and countless surgeons trained there.

Actually, what made Denton unique—because just naming him is enough worldwide—was his clear mind and extraordinary manual skill. He succeeded in simplifying the technique in an incredible manner and that earned him the recognition of his peers, who were simply amazed at his way of acting. Our generation was motivated by him along with other great surgeons such as Christiaan Barnard, Dudley W. Johnson and René G. Favaloro, because everyone wanted to be like these great men. For this reason, it is possible to observe that

our country has always had enormous prestige in the cardiovascular area, remaining at the forefront.

Perhaps new generations do not remember him with the intensity of ours, but they should know that he was one of the surgeons who allowed cardiac surgery to be almost a routine with successful and highly predictable results today. There is not much more to write about Cooley in an attempt to be original, because hundreds of thousands of words have already made him a part of history.

Denton was a highly ambitious and competitive man. He strived hard for all the great advances to be made at his Institute. When Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant in the world, Cooley cabled him to congratulate him. The cable read: "Congratulations on your first transplant, Chris. I will be reporting my first hundred soon."

Some facts that describe him in his entirety and define his personality very well. For those of us who were lucky enough to see him in the operating room, it was not surprising when he completely solved a thoracic aneurysm in 50 minutes, from beginning to end, in a fellow countrywoman who nobody wanted to operate here. When he met her, Denton was 74 years old and had the spirit of a twenty-year-old young man. She expected to get the surgical appointment at least in a week. He entered the room, his great height increased his presence, and smiling kindly he asked her what she was planning to do the following day. Of course, the next afternoon he operated her after adding her to a long list of surgeries.

Denton A. Cooley was the greatest beyond argument. This is what his peers, who have the tools to understand his huge and different capacity, think about him. Cardiovascular surgery was his accomplishment and his sphere. Filing for bankruptcy as a real estate developer, boosted his surgical capacity and he worked feverishly until a very advanced age. In his late nineties, with reduced mobility, he gave lectures encouraging surgeons to study techniques to solve the complications of new mini-invasive endovascular techniques. The support provided by his wife Louise was so important to Denton that just few days after her death at age 94 he followed her in the road to eternity. They raised a large family with five daughters, of whom one died early. He is survived by 16 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

He was a living legend in his days and today became immortal. So much was told about him that it is not possible to distinguish myth from reality. It is said that one day, in a public hearing, a lawyer asked him if he believed that he was the best cardiovascular surgeon in the world. He answered yes. The lawyer said: "I think you are immodest." And he answered: "I remind you that I am under oath!" ■