

The Edward Mott Moore Awards

BY JEN CASASANTA



Physician Award Winner: Roger Oskvig, MD

Have you met Dr. Oskvig?

You may know him as a valued and respected geriatrician that helped build that world class division at Highland Hospital. Or maybe you know him as a credentialing and licensing expert playing long tenure roles at local insurance companies and the University of Rochester? Or possibly as one of the longest serving chairs of the New York State Board of Medicine? Or perhaps, the quiet but formidable force behind the nationally acclaimed PBS program "Second Opinion" with Joan Lunden as chief medical advisor for the 17-year run of the show? Or maybe as the past secretary of the Kohn Journal Club, claimed to be the longest continuously meeting medical journal club in the United States. He was the third secretary for over thirty years of this nearly 100-year-old, invitation only club, fostering intellectual discussion as well as scholarly social interaction amongst internal medicine, medicine subspecialties, and closely related specialties. If not any of those things, you know him for sure as a highly valued expert on medical policy to the Monroe County Medical Society and the insurers.

If you have met him, you will not be surprised by what I am about to tell you. The first paragraph will surely make him squirm. The man does not like talking about himself. I mean, ever, under no circumstances, is he remotely interested in prattling on about himself when he can talk about so many other fascinating things. So much so that he initially rebuffed my request to fill out a "get to

know you" questionnaire that helps me write these Edward Mott Moore articles. Thankfully, after some good-hearted prodding from friends, he agreed to fill it out.

He is honored to be recognized but would much rather talk about the rich history of the MCMS and the medical community here in Rochester. In fact, on a sunny, 88-degree day in June we hit the trail at the historic Mount Hope Cemetery so he could show me some integral people in Rochester's medical history. I am a history buff, and the cemetery is my favorite place in Rochester but in that hour he taught me a few things. First, where Edward Mott Moore's gravesite is and how significant he is- not only to Rochester but the world. "We lean on our colleagues and our predecessors to become who we are and hopefully, better than who we are. The reason we have this prize is because of Edward Mott Moore," he says. Moore was president and a founder of the Medical Society of the State of New York (1874), of the American Surgical Association (1883), and of the American Medical Association (1890) and even considered the "father" of the Rochester Park System. He also showed me where Dr. Sarah Adamson Dolley was buried. She was the third woman physician to receive her medical degree in the United States, the first woman physician in Rochester, co-founder of the local Red Cross, and among many other things, was also a member of the MCMS. There are many more notable medical "residents" at the cemetery as well, and if you are a medical student or resident at the University of Rochester, he may even take

you on your own tour. Now, during our walk, Dr. Oskvig was wearing a jacket and bow tie and didn't break a sweat on those hilly roads, in that sticky weather. I, in my shorts and t-shirt, who is about 30 years "younger" than he, was melting into a puddle. I was not warned that the man was this active.

He tells me he practices 'sustained exercise without nutrition and hydration' but he would likely also credit part of this stamina and determination to growing up as the oldest child of five on an Iowa Farm with livestock and row crop. This is also where he met the love of his life, Melissa. They grew up on adjacent farms in rural Willams, Iowa, (population: 301). At the age of 11, while working with him at the 4-H booth at the county fair, Melissa declared to her twin sister that he would be marrying her. "So we got engaged at her senior prom," he smiles. Things took a slight turn at this time.

"I grew up on the farm and dreamed that I wanted to be a farmer, but my father did not have the resources to start me up in farming as I was the oldest, so I went to college to find me a trade. Which turned out be medicine," he laughs. He was the first Oskvig to go to college and get a degree. His undergraduate degree major was science and religion, but he was undecided about whether to do theology or medicine. He applied to graduate schools in both and got accepted in both, so a decision had to be made. "Our minister and friend said it was simple: I could practice my faith as a doctor but couldn't do it the other way around. I accepted the offer to the University of Iowa College of Medicine," he says.

Melissa attended the Iowa Methodist Hospital School of nursing in Des Moines, IA while he was 100 miles away at university. Since it was a Methodist-based school they had to keep their marriage a secret because as a student she couldn't be married or have a child...which was a challenge since she became pregnant her senior year. "She had to go to the matriarchs to say she had two confessions to make," he laughs. Luckily, she was top of the class and was able to deliver their first son and get one week off for maternity leave. Her twin sister took care of their son in Ames. Because of their studies, they didn't reside in the same house until Melissa graduated three months after their first child was born!

While at the University of Iowa, he worked for the pathology department doing immunofluorescent and electron microscopy. In his senior year, Dr. Oskvig had the opportunity of a lifetime- to study at Oxford University in England. The U of I had a student exchange program for senior medical students and he was selected for the Oxford prize from his class of 175. Luckily for him his wife- who was pregnant with their second child- was supportive. At Oxford, Dr. Oskvig was

assigned to J. G. G. Ledingham, Regis Professor of Medicine, who instilled in him a passion to understand the history, and legacy, in medicine. He also stumbled across a series of medical cartoons by caricaturist, Thomas Rowlandson, of the London Gazette. As a poor medical student, he was made an offer he couldn't refuse and that was to promise to frame and hang the art on his practice walls, which he did for many years. You can now find them in Dr. Joanne Nazareth's office.

At the end of his time as a medical student at U of I, he was focusing on immuno and transplanted pathology as an academic career and was encouraged by Dr. Jim Clifton to come to Rochester to do an internal medicine residency to become a better Immunopathologist. He studied here from 1974 - 1977 as a resident in internal medicine. In 1975, he had a mandatory clerkship at Monroe Community Hospital. Having spent time in that stunning gothic structure, he was inspired by T. Franklin Williams to do research on the building. He met architect Thomas Boyd in that process, building engineers took him into the attics and bowels of the facility, he took photos, gave talks, and wrote a paper titled "A Lombardic Edifice on Gargoylism" that won him the MCMS medical student research award. It's a full circle moment for him because he has now won the Edward Mott Moore Award. "The circle begins and ends with MCMS," he says. Besides that, he really enjoyed his time as part of the pathology department. Dr. Oskvig and his wife were planning to head back to Iowa after residency, but instead he was called back into the United States Air Force in 1977 and sent to Dyess Air Force Base, Texas.

"Those four years changed the trajectory of my career and interests to include administration, credentialing, discipline, and remediation. Right out of residency, I was appointed the chief of several clinical services (among them medicine, pathology lab, radiology, pharmacy), and chair of several committees (including credentials)," he says.

Another interesting thing that happened while he was in the Air Force, was he started doing his annual "birthday run". This is not your typical jog, this is where he runs a mile for each year of his existence, in a 24-hour period. This year will be 75 miles...in one day. "At the age of 29 I wondered if I could run 29 miles- so I did, and then have done it every year, usually on my birthday, in the middle of the winter. I begin at midnight. My sons call it my "birthday death march", he laughs. "They are trying to convince me to do 100 minus my age, so when I'm 99 I only have to do 1 mile in 24 hours! They don't like hearing I've been on the road for 18 hours!" As I mentioned earlier, the man is fit.

Anyway, he moved into solo private practice after the Air Force, then joined a group private practice, from which he was recruited to be Chair of Medicine at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center in Amarillo, Texas, and the program director for internal medicine and medicine-pediatric residencies. "While Chair at TTUHSC, I invited Dr. Robert C. Griggs from the

University of Rochester to Amarillo, to help me create and recruit a division of neurology in my Medicine Department, which he did. In return, Dr. Griggs asked me to come to Rochester. He was the chair of the search committee for a chief of geriatrics and medical director at Monroe Community Hospital," he says.

So, Dr. Oskvig returned to Rochester in 1989, with the specific job of recruiting geriatric faculty, re-accrediting the geriatric fellowship program, and building a larger foundation for geriatric medicine scholarship. "At the time, the URM Dean, Dr. Robert J. Joynt, the URM Dean of Nursing, Dr. Ryan, and the Chair of Medicine were all lowans!" he laughs. He has been with URM, and in many of the regional hospitals and nursing homes ever since, attending and consulting, and sometimes in leadership roles. Soon after arrival, he was on credentials committees, the New York State Board of Professional Medical Conduct, the New York State Board of Medicine, the Accreditation Review Commission for Physician Assistants, and Federation of State Medical Boards, to name a few.

He has seen a lot after so many years in the medical profession. When asked what he thought the biggest challenge the medical community is facing he has a simple response. "Morality. Healthcare institutions are agnostic, neither good nor bad. We, the physicians in them, our leaders, are the moral foundation of our guild. We practice within those institutions, where corporate interests, and the need to be financially viable to fulfill their missions, are huge forces. Physicians are a more powerful force of moral good when we use it," he expresses. He is an incredibly moral person. Salt of the Earth, steady, kind, thoughtful, so one of the most difficult decisions he had to make in his career has been to discipline a colleague, to decline to license a physician, and to remove a fellow physician's license to practice. It was for the good of the public, but he knows he hurt a professional colleague. He makes a habit of doing the right thing. When asked what his proudest professional moment is he responds much as you would expect: humbly. "The sin I fight most is pride, and I am Methodist, not Catholic!" he laughs. Before the Edward Mott Moore recognition, he would say he was being elected Chair of the New York State Board of Medicine, and that position's opportunity to interact with the NYS Board of Regents.

Dr. Oskvig is a curious man, with many interests. Something people might be surprised to learn about him is that he can overhaul a car, drive semi's, plumb and wire a house, and build furniture and wants to grow up to be as good as his sons. When asked what his biggest lesson learned this year he responded in two parts. Professionally: policy to the fifth power is more important than ever. He says, "It is our policy to

follow our policy and in the absence of a policy it is our policy to write a policy. Objective, prospective, measurable, fair." Personally, he believes every day is a holiday, cherish it and those you love.

He finds great inspiration in his family and friends. When World War 2 broke out, his dad was too young to register for the draft so lied about his age and became the first draftee from Iowa. His mother-in-law was a WW2 army nurse, father-in-law in the Army Air Corps, uncles in D-Day invasion, ... "Our fathers, family and professionally, Melissa's and my father, our uncles, her mother and aunts, were all WW2 soldiers. I honor the quote about those forefathers: 'The American citizen soldier knew right from wrong, and did not want to live in a world where wrong prevailed.' That applies to the giants in medicine we honor," he says. "We are all a product of our personal and community histories, and that is the template for who we might become. The past has passed, the future begins today, each and every day." He does go on to say specifically that his professional friends here in Rochester: Dr. Robert Joynt, Dr. Berch Griggs, and Dr. Dennis Asselin were and are an inspiration for him.

Of course, he, himself is inspirational. He makes a difference. Just ask any of those who sent recommendation letters on his behalf. This is also the first time that I have received letters from people AFTER he was announced the EMM Physician Award winner. As his niece Sara Elliot wrote, "When I think of a "giant", I think of someone who is larger than life. Someone who gives of themselves more than they expect in return. Someone you can always find when times are tough. Someone who has so very much to give that they can't help themselves. Someone whose name is known by people who have never even met them. That's my Uncle Roger." His friends, family and colleagues are thrilled to see him be recognized after the long, steady, important work he has done.

Although he is still very busy with his career, he knows the value of appreciating time with the ones he loves. In fact, his perfect day would be to awake knowing that his family and those he cares about are safe and healthy. He would have a long breakfast with Melissa, be told that their recruits are licensed and the ones who need have approved visas, learn that the credentials committees' red flags are few, participate in meaningful quality improvement, end the work day feeling something good was accomplished, share supper with Melissa, and at bedtime have the day as it started "With my family safe and healthy," he says.

He's not slowing down any time soon to rest on his laurels. Not at all.

"I will continue doing what I am doing for as long as I am a meaningful contributor, live more each day. And, one day this year, do my birthday "run", a mile for every year within 24 hours, this year 75 miles," he smiles.