

Denton Cooley

Dr. Denton Cooley died in Houston, Texas on November 18, 2016 at the age of 96.

When I first arrived at Texas Children's Hospital in 2010, I thought it was important for me as Senior Editor of our journal, *Congenital Heart Disease*, to see if I could spend time interviewing Dr. Cooley in regards to his life and accomplishments. Dr. Chuck Fraser, his son-in-law, who is head of Congenital Heart Surgery and all of surgery at Texas Children's Hospital has been a life-long friend for over 25 years.

I did have the opportunity for four one-hour interviews with Dr. Cooley when he was 93, just three years ago. He had operated on children until he was 87 and had performed over 100,000 operations. He was still working four days a week for half-days. During the interviews, he was gracious, charming, considerate, thoughtful, entertaining, wistful, charismatic, and extremely kind—all characteristics that have served him well as an individual who may be recognized as the greatest cardiac surgeon of all time.

He had published a book in 2012 called "One Hundred Thousand Hearts," detailing the surgeries and some of the stories of his life. However, in four one-hour interviews he did with me, there were more stories and amplification of some of the information that appeared in that book. Our interviews were published in the issues of *Congenital Heart Disease*, Volume #9-9#4 and appeared in the January through August issues of 2014.

Dr. Cooley was as an amazing individual as he was a cardiac surgeon. He was an excellent athlete at 6'5", playing college basketball for the University of Texas, but he also was a superb tennis player. Later in life, he began playing golf and as the usual, became an avid and excellent golfer. He was comfortable in the presence of individuals from the poorest family in Houston, Texas to the kings and famous people in entertainment throughout the world. He treated everyone with great respect and dignity.

His legacy and history is unmatched. He was incredibly innovative and creative and worked tirelessly. He was the first cardiac surgeon to do a heart transplant in the United States and also the first cardiac surgeon to place an implantable cardiac device in a patient. He was constantly pushing the boundaries of what cardiac surgery could and should do, not only in adults but in infants and neonates as well. No

other surgeon in the world had the breadth of experience of Dr. Cooley and his ability to operate on a two-week old with congenital cardiac disease and then go in and operate on a 75-year old with an aortic dissection. He not only had great skill in the operations that he did, but he was also an incredibly fast and could do multiple operations in complicated patients in a single day.

In 2002, he helped form and dedicate the Texas Heart Institute. In 2003, the Texas Heart Institute became the first nationally ranked cardiovascular center in the United States to open a cath lab medical simulation training center. In 2004, the center gained FDA approval for human trials of adult stem cells to treat patients with advanced heart failure. In 2001, the Texas Heart Institute marked its 1,000 open heart surgery and in 2006, marked its 1,000 heart transplant.

Dr. Cooley loved to work with young trainees in his surgical program but was also very interested in helping our pediatric cardiology fellows and always came and spoke at their graduation. He could not have been more kind and considerate to our trainees and their families, many of whom were in awe just to be in the same room with him.

Dr. Cooley had a very famous saying which he spoke to me a number of times and that was "the day is finished when the work is done." Dr. Cooley's work in a sense will never be done because of all the advancements he personally made and his drive to continue that work in the future. He would be very proud that his legacy lives on in the great surgical work being done at the Texas Heart Institute and Texas Children's Hospital. His real legacy is the quality of that work where the standards are extremely high because of his past devotion to excellence.

Throughout the next year, in the journal, I will be highlighting some of the unique aspects of our interviews with Dr. Cooley, providing excerpts from those interviews.

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