



By
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Dr. Michael DeBakey, a pioneer heart surgeon at the Texas Medical Center and an internationally recognized physician, died of natural causes at The Methodist Hospital, Houston, on Friday night July 12, 2008. He was 99.

Michael DeBakey came to the Baylor Medical College in Houston in 1948 and made it his home, from where he pioneered the development of many cardiovascular surgery procedures that have saved the lives of thousands of people. He had brought worldwide recognition to the Texas Medical Center and The Methodist Hospital; and had attracted very prominent people including entertainers, business people, and numerous heads of states from around the globe, who came for cardiovascular surgery.

As a cardiologist, I had the pleasure of working with Dr. DeBakey at The Methodist Hospital, since I came to Houston in 1980, and the distinct honor to see one of the finest cardiac surgeons at work in the operating room. He had said that he is not a perfectionist, but there was no room for an error when you are dealing with someone's heart.

Michael DeBakey, a son of Lebanese immigrants, was born on September 7, 1908. He was inspired to go into medicine by listening to the medical conversation at his father's pharmacy. Even though, he was interested in medicine, originally he

did not envision becoming a heart surgeon.

Michael DeBakey attended the Tulane University, in New Orleans. When he completed his medical school in 1932, there was hardly any treatment available for cardiac patients.

Michael DeBakey's innovations in the field of cardiovascular surgery span over several decades. While he was still in the medical school in 1932, he invented the roller pumps which are a component of a heart-lung machine that is in use even today. When a patient undergoes cardiac surgery, the heart is temporarily arrested, while the blood is redirected to the heart-lung machine which oxygenates the blood and maintains the circulation.

During World War II, he worked in Europe as a consultant to the surgeon general, in developing Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (MASH). The famous "MASH" TV series that ran for more than a decade was modeled after this. After the war, he returned to Tulane University. His visionary mission led to the establishment of the Veterans Administration Medical Centers across the country.

Michael DeBakey used a Dacron graft to bypass an occluded artery for the first time in 1953. In the 1960s he started doing the coronary artery bypass surgeries. In 1966, he implanted partial artificial heart called a left ventricular bypass pump.

Dr. Christiaan Bernard from South Africa was the first person to perform the total heart transplantation in the world, in 1967. In the United States, Drs. Michael DeBakey and Denton Cooley were among the first cardiovascular surgeons to perform the heart transplantations. The first era of heart transplantations were associated with a high mortality rate

due to rejection that dealt a serious blow to the nascent enthusiasm. It was the advent of the cyclosporine in the 1980s, an anti-rejection drug gave a new ray of hope for transplant patients and DeBakey resumed his transplant surgeries in 1984.



Michael DeBakey was the first to classify the various types of splits or tears in the aorta called aortic dissection, which bears his name (DeBakey type I and DeBakey type II).

He also pioneered the invention of numerous surgical instruments that are indispensable in modern day cardiac surgery.

He always challenged the status quo and did not hesitate to find ways to improve the lives of people with cardiovascular disease. By 1992, he had performed more than 50,000 heart surgeries.

He was the author of more than 1000 publications, book chapters, and books on cardiovascular surgery. He was a tireless individual who worked from dawn till late hours in the evening. Cardiac surgery was his passion. He used to emphasize to the cardiac surgery fellows that stamina and commitments were very essential to a cardiac surgeon as some aortic aneurysm surgeries could take as much as 8 to 12 hours. Fellows with weak heart and short attention span had no place in his department.

He went on to invent the left ventricular assist device in the 1990s. It is used to bridge the gap in patients who are waiting for heart transplant

but their heart is too weak to maintain adequate circulation even at rest.

Michael DeBakey's medical expertise knew no national boundaries. In 1996, at age 87, he flew to Moscow to oversee President Boris Yeltsin's heart bypass surgery.

Michael DeBakey, at age 97, underwent repair of his damaged aorta in 2006, a surgical technique which he had invented several decades ago, in the mid-1950s. He was the oldest patient to undergo the very surgery he invented. Although, initially he had refused the surgery, he said that he would not have been alive had it not been for that surgery. He lived for two more years following that surgery.

His first wife Diana Cooper died of heart disease in 1972. He is survived by his second wife a German film actress Katrin Felhaber, and three siblings.

Both Michael DeBakey and Denton Cooley worked together at the Baylor College of Medicine in the early 1960s. A disagreement between the two most eminent cardiac surgeons resulted in Denton Cooley moving over to St. Luke's Episcopal hospital and establishing the Texas Heart Institute. As the saying goes, the two world famous heart surgeons' rivalry spanned over several decades until 2007 when they reconciled their differences.

A high school for healthcare professionals in Houston, the Veteran Administration Medical Center in Houston, the Heart Institute and the Cardiovascular Center at The Methodist Hospital in Houston are all named after Michael DeBakey.

Michael DeBakey had earned enviable reputation as a medical Statesman. He had served as an advisor to every President during the past fifty years.

Michael DeBakey received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969; National Medal of Science in 1987 from President Ronald Reagan; Living legend citation by the library of congress in 2000; and the congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush, in the year 2008, just three months before his death.

Michael DeBakey joined the Baylor College of Medicine and The Methodist Hospital in 1948. His career spanned over six decades. The Methodist Hospital was his place of work, worship, research, and education. It was his passion. This is where he spent his entire medical life and turned The Methodist Hospital into a world class cardiac center. That was an exceptionally unique relationship that existed between him and The Methodist Hospital. Such relationships are practically unheard off and a lot of credit goes to The Methodist Hospital which provided one of the finest institutional supports to make a Michael DeBakey a medical-world legend.

With Michael DeBakey's passing away, the Texas Medical Center and the whole medical world has truly lost one of its most revered colleagues, a visionary, a teacher, and a brilliant cardiac surgeon.

Disclosure: The information provided here is for educational purpose only. Please consult with your physician for any medical advice.

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