

## Obituary

# In Memoriam: Dr. William (Bill) Stewart Tucker June 11, 1943–October 2, 2023

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Much of what you have just read is based on an interview recorded with Dr Tucker on May 21, 1992, when the author was travelling and interviewing people for essays on the history of neurosurgery at the Toronto General Hospital.<sup>3,4</sup> This journal's Editor then was the great Jim Sharpe, who taught the author neuro-ophthalmology at TWH, and who was one of Bill Tucker's coresidents during his neuropathology rotation. Bill and I met at the now long-gone diner "The Senator" on Victoria Street just around the corner from Bill's Shuter Street office, about a block away from St. Mike's and Massey Hall. This photo of Bill was taken that evening (note the cigar)!

When heading for a rotation at St Michael's Hospital neurosurgery residents were warned they would need to be on their toes to win Dr Bill Tucker's approval, and make no mistake, we would *want* his approval.

It was impossible to guess what Dr Tucker's criteria were for a "good" resident, after all we were in the program, we *had* to be

good. But over his long career at St Michael's hospital Bill took considerable interest in studying his residents and sizing us up one by one.

William Stewart Tucker was born in Toronto in 1943 and grew up and attended public schools in Etobicoke, then a separate city but in 1998 amalgamated into the city of Toronto. Bill graduated from medical school at the University of Toronto in 1968 when it was a 6-year program including two "premed" years, at the age of 25 years.

Bill's initial goal in medicine was to become a psychiatrist. His father suffered a serious mental illness and died after aspirating into his lungs during electroconvulsive therapy. Bill was a teenager at the time and the family's loss was devastating. Not resentful, but disappointed that psychiatry didn't seem to be doing much for patients like his dad, Bill reckoned that if one reasonably intelligent person entered the profession, he or she "would be able to straighten the whole mess out in short order" as he put it. In medical school, he gradually came to the realization that this was a pipe dream, but sticking with the brain he became drawn to the "deductive reasoning and organizational approach" he saw in "medical neurology" (as he always referred to what we all know as neurology, but Bill liked the idea of "surgical neurology" too). After his third year in medical school, he spent the summer working at the Princess Margaret Hospital helping with brain tumor patients, and it was then and there he came to believe that the *surgeons* were the ones really making a difference, the ones truly "in charge."

As an intern at the Toronto Western Hospital, where he met his future wife Ruth (an assistant head nurse on a general surgical floor), he realized he had a "surgical personality," as he called it.

After internship Dr Tucker started neurosurgical training in 1969 at the Toronto General Hospital (TGH) with Mike Hunter his senior resident (Bill remembered every single resident he worked with, and respected all of them, but especially Mike Hunter). This was followed by neurosurgery rotations throughout the city, an entire year of neuropathology with Dr Barry Rewcastle and 6 months of neurology with Dr Rick Richardson (both at TGH), both men giants in their field, devoted to teaching, and leaving huge impressions on Bill. The chairman of neurosurgery during Bill's training was Dr Tom Morley, for whom Bill had huge respect as a surgeon with impeccable judgment, and as a role

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model on how to behave as a surgeon: cool and unflappable no matter what calamity he was faced with. His most important mentors were two *other* Bills, Dr Bill Lougheed at TGH, the consummate instructor of surgical technique,<sup>1</sup> and Dr Bill Horsey at St Michael's (hereafter "St. Mike's") who had (at that time in the field of neurosurgery) unique interests in trauma and spine surgery, and whose wisdom and intelligence were, in Dr Tucker's opinion, unmatched.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Tucker had countless stories about his training, coresidents, and teachers. For example, he said of two prominent but very different neurosurgeons who taught both Bill and me: "Well, let me put it this way: if Dr X publicly tore you to shreds because of something that happened to his patient you were looking after, you knew you had probably done what anyone would have done under the circumstances, but if Dr Y quietly took you aside a day or two after some complication and suggest that 'Maybe next time in a situation like that, you might consider . . .' well, you probably ought to go out and shoot yourself." It was a funny story and an ironic one too since Bill Tucker was to become, as a staffman, famous for both his temper and his kindness.

Following his neurosurgical training, Bill did a year of fellowship in Denver, then joined the St Mike's neurosurgical staff in 1972. He had many roles at St Mike's and at the University of Toronto (U of T). Dr Tucker helped establish the trauma program at St Mike's in the 1980s and was head of the Neurosurgery Department at the hospital in the 1990s.

Dr Tucker's biggest role outside of a large practice of general and vascular neurosurgery, and besides hospital administration, was in surgical and neurosurgical education. Bill served first as Deputy and then the Neurosurgical Program Director for the U of T Division of Neurosurgery (1989–1996), and Director of Undergraduate Education for the Department of Surgery at the U of T (1996–2004). Like his own surgical heroes, Lougheed and Horsey, Dr Tucker became a legendary teacher. If you did win his trust as a learner, you were rewarded with his unconditional support and lifelong friendship.

Another major contribution was Dr Tucker's role, first on the Council of the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA), and then President, between 1994 and 2013. He took great pride in his role with the CMPA and helped convince another

neurosurgeon, a former resident Dr Chris Wallace, to take up the baton with the association.

Dr Tucker retired from his neurosurgical practice at St Mike's in 2012.

When I think of Bill, I remember a man with a great sense of humor who loved laughing at his and our jokes, and his big, wide-toothed, friendly grin.

The last time I saw Bill in Toronto before the pandemic and his illness, I asked him just *how did* he judge residents and decide who got into his good books, where we all wanted to be? He told me it was "hands, head and heart," meaning that residents had to have decent "hands" he could instruct and teach, a decent brain and memory (he didn't appreciate having to tell you twice how *he* liked things done). "Heart" meant an inexhaustible need for experience and operating: His recipe for a good surgical resident and eventually, a good surgeon. Dr Bill Tucker helped make many of those, and that, along with the thousands of patients whose lives he made better, is his neurosurgical legacy.

In the last years of his life, Bill Tucker wrote a book on the history of neurosurgery at the University of Toronto for the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Division of Neurosurgery at the University of Toronto.

Bill died of leukemia in the hospital where he discovered his destiny, the Princess Margaret, surrounded by his family. It was about 1 year from his diagnosis, and according to his lifelong friend Bill Medlock and ex-wife and mother to their sons, Ruth, was a pretty good year, until Bill's final days.

Bill leaves two sons who he never stopped bragging about, Mike and Mark, his partner Barbara with whom he had been with for over 20 happy years, Ruth Tucker, and all their families.

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