



**Notable Grand Rounds**  
*of the*  
**Michael & Marian Ilitch**  
**Department of Surgery**

Wayne State University  
School of Medicine

Detroit, Michigan, USA

---

**Dr. Charles Lucas**

**DR ALEXANDER J WALT:  
HISTORIAN, PHILOSOPHER,  
AND SURGICAL EDUCATOR**

---

September 7, 2022

### **About Notable Grand Rounds**

These assembled papers are edited transcripts of didactic lectures given by mainly senior residents, but also some distinguished attending and guests, at the Grand Rounds of the Michael and Marian Ilitch Department of Surgery at the Wayne State University School of Medicine.

Every week, approximately 50 faculty attending surgeons and surgical residents meet to conduct postmortems on cases that did not go well. That “Mortality and Morbidity” conference is followed immediately by Grand Rounds.

This collection is not intended as a scholarly journal, but in a significant way it is a peer reviewed publication by virtue of the fact that every presentation is examined in great detail by those 50 or so surgeons.

It serves to honor the presenters for their effort, to potentially serve as first draft for an article for submission to a medical journal, to let residents and potential residents see the high standard achieved by their peers and expected of them, and by no means least, to contribute to better patient care.

David Edelman, MD  
Program Director  
The Detroit Medical Center

and

Professor of Surgery  
Wayne State University School of Medicine

**Dr Alexander J Walt:  
Historian, Philosopher, and Surgical Educator**

**Charles Lucas, MD**

Professor of Surgery  
Wayne State University  
School of Medicine

Surgical Grand Rounds  
September 7, 2022

*The talk from which this paper was derived was first delivered by Dr. Lucas at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Surgical Association in August, 2022.*

**A Tragic Family History**

For hundreds of years, ghettos were common in parts of Europe. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was set in one. In the extended Russian Empire (spanning modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, and parts of Ukraine, Poland, Latvia and the Russian Federation) the ghetto was called the "Pale of Settlement."

If you were a Jew, you'd best be back in the ghetto before sunset. This was certainly true in the Pale, where bored Cossack paramilitaries, drunk on some good Russian vodka, would raid the ghetto, killing and injuring many Jews before going home to sober up.

Conscription was established in Russia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For a Jew, conscription was about as bad as remaining in the ghetto: They were not fully integrated into the Russian military, and were often selected to lead almost suicidal assaults on fixed enemy positions.

Conscription began at age 12, and if there weren't enough Jewish children to fill the quota,

the age requirement would be dropped down to 10. Conscripts had to serve until they were 30 years old.

So it was a good idea to get out of there, and in 1906, Isaac Walt did just that, emigrating to South Africa from Lithuania, fleeing its ghetto and pogroms and Cossack assaults and Russian army conscription.

Isaac married Leah Garb in 1910. They had five children. Alec was one. Leah and Alec's two older sisters Frieda and Jane were among 63 pas-



Fig. 1: Isaac and Leah Walt



Fig. 2: Frieda, Leah, and Jane, died in a train crash in 1926

sengers killed in a train crash in 1926. Isaac raised the remaining three children, shown in Figure 3 (below) with Isaac's brother, Barney. All three boys became physicians. Alec thought he might want to be a journalist, but his older brothers and father convinced him otherwise.



Fig. 3: L-R: Isaac, Alec (3), Uncle Barney, Frank (11), Maurice (14)

### South Africa and WW2

Alec attended Grey High School in Port Elizabeth in South Africa, after which he went to the University of Cape Town, straight into medical school, into the Faculty of Medicine. But not long after he started medical school, World War 2 broke out and in 1941 he enlisted in the South African army with his good friend, Bill Hoffenberg.

They were assigned to the 6th South African Armored Division, which was attached to the British Eighth Army under Field Marshal Montgomery. Figure 5 shows Alec and Bill during the hot summer in their fatigues in North Africa.

After driving Rommel out of Egypt, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army crossed the Mediterranean, moved up the east-



Fig. 4: Alec in battledress



Fig. 5: Bill and Alec in fatigues

ern coast of Sicily, and crossed over into the foot of Italy and finally reached Rome, whereupon Italy surrendered.

In Italy, he was exposed to Americans. He always described American society as being a generous society. He met his first American on a cold night north of Florence, Italy. He was off base and a US sergeant drove by in a jeep and offered him a ride. Alec ranted to his new friend about army food, mail, generals, and the weather. (Musing on this memory much later in Detroit, he said he was acting like a surgical resident.)

The sergeant responded: "Son, you've got to learn to compromise with the inevitable." That advice, in different words, was often used by Dr. Walt when he consulted his surgical residents.

After the war, he went back to finish medical school at the University of Cape Town. He was quite an athlete—a cricketer and hurdler on the track and field team (Figures 6 and 7 on next page).

He had the good sense to marry Irene before he finished medical school (Figure 8, next page).

### Becoming a Surgeon

After graduating from medical school in 1948 he went to London, England to take a one-year course in basic surgical physiology. This made him eligible to become a member of the Royal



Fig. 6: Captain of the University of Cape Town cricket team



Fig. 7: 100m Hurdler



Fig. 8: Irene and Walt, celebrating his graduation from medical school.

College of Surgeons. Following that, he went to the Mayo Clinic where he did his surgical training from 1949-1955. While there, he became an official candidate for fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, and also got his master's degree in surgery. In 1956 he went back to England, where he completed his requirements at St. Marten Hospital in Bath and officially became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.

In 1957 he moved to Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa, as an assistant surgeon and lecturer. Dr. Jon van Heerden, one of the medical students at Cape Town at the time, later described the "distinct attributes for which [Alec] was to become famous" as already "obvious: His lucid presentation, mixed with wit and humanism, a touch of a British accent and an American twang [made him] admired by the male

students, and caused the hearts of the female students to go a-flutter."

He used to compete with the students on the cricket pitches, regale them about the Mayo Clinic at the Pig and Whistle pub on Fridays, and challenge them on the golf courses on the weekends.

Jon describes how Dr. Walt was always the mentor. Jon asked Alex: "Which surgical residency in South Africa is best for me?" Alec responded. "You belong at the Mayo Clinic. I will take care of it." Dr. van Heerden went on to become a famous surgeon there.

### Moving to America

Hendrik Verwoerd created apartheid in 1948 and implemented it when he became South African premier in 1956. He promoted apartheid to the world as meaning "separate but equal." The turning point against apartheid was the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, when 69 unarmed protesters were killed by police—most of them shot in the back.

(I myself was in Cape Town in 1976 for a series of lectures and saw apartheid at first hand. It was not equal. It was far worse than the old American South.)

Alec's cousin-in-law and family patriarch Theodore Levin, chief judge of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, sent a letter telling Alec to get out of South Africa. He and Irene decided not to go back to the Mayo Clinic or to England but to come to Detroit, where the Levin clan was located. He was appointed assistant professor of surgery at Wayne State University and a consultant at the John S. Dingell Veterans Hospital.

### From Assistant Professor to Interim Chair

At Wayne, all of the residents and students liked his teaching techniques, both in the operating room and on rounds. He revitalized the weekly Journal Club by emphasizing different aspects of

history and surgical physiology. He spiced up the Saturday morning Grand Rounds. (In those days, residents worked on Saturdays and Grand Rounds were held on Saturday mornings.) He received the student teaching award on three occasions. (The only other person to have done that is Dr. Anna Ledgerwood.)

The department had a crisis in 1966 when both the chair and vice chair decided to move on to other locations. With no chairperson in immediate prospect, the Dean of the School of Medicine asked Dr. Walt to serve as interim chair.

He achieved a great deal very quickly. He understood the Department and its problems and he understood administration. At that time the surgical specialties—neurosurgery, for instance—were divisions within a single Department of Surgery. It was way past the time for that to change, and Dr. Walt convinced the Dean to turn all of the divisions into independent Departments.

At that time, there was also a long-standing crisis between the heart surgeons at the Receiving Hospital and at the Children's Hospital, and Dr. Walt brought them together to resolve it. He also rectified teaching problems that were occurring at the VA hospital and revitalized the GE Journal Club with large doses of history.

### *The Detroit Riots*

The first great challenge in his interim chairmanship occurred in the pre-dawn hours of July 23, 1967, when police raided a "blind pig" (an unlicensed after-hours bar) just west of the old Receiving Hospital. Stores were torched, buildings were destroyed, and there were many injuries. This was kept out of the news until 6 pm, when news anchor Bill Bonds reported that there was an ongoing civil disturbance.

Alec and Irene were visiting friends when the news came out, and he immediately said: "We have to go." He told Irene to pack him some underwear because he was going to be at the hos-

pital for a while. Irene thought he was crazy, but in truth he knew what was coming, based upon his experience with apartheid in South Africa.

During the riots, Receiving Hospital treated 1,500 injured patients in four days, of whom 500 were treated in a 30 hour period.

Dr. Walt's point of view was that the riot itself was not the main story: The inequality that caused it was real story.

On July 25, all nine operating rooms at the old Receiving Hospital were full. Using his experience during the Eight Army's Italian campaign, Dr. Walt oversaw the creation of two additional operating rooms in the hallways. By all standards, this was identified as a great success. The Dean saw it as his opportunity to eliminate the word "interim" from Dr. Walt's chairmanship of the Department.

### **Beautification and Working Conditions**

He challenged Irene to become involved in a beautification program which extended throughout the old Receiving Hospital and into the new Receiving Hospital. The old Receiving Hospital had 13-bed wards, with no curtains, shades, or stands. The SICU had no air-conditioning and no screens. The call rooms had only one central toilet among them. The whole area was crowded. The atrium looked like a bus station from the previous century, with people waiting on long, hard benches. And of course, there was no artwork.

Alec and Irene worked to beautify the hospital. They went to community leaders, including all of the big corporations. Board members became involved. Spouses in the Law School and the Medical School became involved. The president's office became involved. It was a big thing. It took a lot of effort to assemble and hold such a diverse group of people together in order to achieve the endpoint.



Meanwhile, it was the dog days of August—hot and humid. The 9-bed ICU had no air conditioning and no screens on the windows. One capable 3<sup>rd</sup> year resident, JZ, overworked like all the others (the 80-hour work week did not exist back then) wrote an order on the chart: "shoo flies from trach stoma prn". The hospital administrator said to Dr. Walt: "I want him fired." Dr. Walt approached me and said: "Why don't you meet with the hospital administrator and promise there will be discipline when the screens go up."

I did, and on day two, the screens went up. On day three, I told the administrator I would chastise JZ. On day four, Irene somehow arranged for air conditioning in all the ICUs at the old Receiving Hospital. On day five, I chastised JZ to two beers and a burger. Dr. Walt wanted to know if I had some complicity in this and I told him if I had thought about it, I would have recommended that course of action. But all the credit for this happy outcome goes to Dr. Walt.

### Master Educator

Dr. Walt was a master educator. We used to have 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students attending rounds and he would have a list of their names. He would call out one of them and say, "Who was Billroth?"

If the student didn't answer, that was an admission of being AWOL and the student had to report the next week that Billroth was a friend of Brahms, that he was an excellent musician who played three different instruments, that he wanted to become a musician but was convinced by his mother to go into medicine, was appointed Chair of the Department of Surgery at the University of Vienna in 1887 by Emperor Franz Joseph I, performed the first successful esophagectomy, the first total laryngectomy, the first subtotal colectomy, and the first successful partial gastrectomy, in which he removed a carcinoma of the duodenum and connected the stomach to the duodenum (Billroth I procedure).<sup>1</sup>

This is part of the technique Dr. Wall used to get three staff awards.

The residents were given Detroit Symphony Orchestra tickets. The DSO is only a quarter of a mile from Receiving Hospital and some of our residents today have never been there. But Dr. Walt would have residents report back on the history of the composer whose music they went to hear on a particular evening.

One of our very good residents failed his boards. Dr. Walt called the faculty to his office and announced: "This is a faculty failure. How can we improve?" What was considered a crisis back then—a single failure—is unfortunately not considered so critical today.

Dr. Walt appointed Dr. Irwin Rosenberg to lead the multidisciplinary, multi-departmental student program. Attendance was 100%. If an orthoped or a general surgeon didn't show for the meeting, there would be a call from Dr. Walt asking to know: "Are you okay?" The errant surgeon would not fail to be present at future meetings.

### Innovations in Education

Dr. Walt had a lot of innovative ideas on education. Figure 9 is from his lecture as president of the American College of Surgeons, making recommendations that the College should follow.

#### ACS Presidential Lecture 1994: Improve Education

- 1) Reduce rigidity dictated by scheduling demands
- 2) Reduce service demands compromising education
- 3) Eliminate hospital deficiencies due to money issues
- 4) Stop "signing out" residents not fully qualified
- 5) Increase program use to improve resident skills
- 6) Attend to resident personal needs
- 7) Enhance instruction in area of ethical dilemmas
- 8) Enhance recruitment and training of minorities
- 9) Eliminate bias against women
- 10) Increase exposure to private practice challenges
- 11) Enhance instruction on hospital charges/OR costs
- 12) Increase emphasis on our surgical origins/pride

Dulchavsky S A et al 1999 AJ Wall Reflections; WSU Press

Fig. 9: How to Improve Surgical Education

<sup>1</sup> More on this fascinating surgeon can be found in Kyle, Robert A. and David P. Steensma (2018). "Christian Albert Theodor Billroth: Founder of Abdominal Surgery." Stamp Vignette on Medical Science 93:3, E29-E30, March 1, 2018. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2017.06.026>

In another lecture, this time at the American Association for the Surgery of Trauma in 1977, he noted that most slaughter occurred on the roads. Over 50% of the drivers in accidents were legally drunk. He criticized the AAST for remaining silent on the issue, pointing out that in Michigan, a felony with a gun carried a two-year non-negotiable prison sentence. He asked why assault or murder with a car was not treated in the same manner.

Society's tolerance for drunken driving, he said, made no sense medically, economically, or morally, and pointed out that other civilized countries insisted upon discipline with respect to alcohol in order to protect the innocent.



Fig. 10: Dr. van Heerden, Mrs. Cooper, and Dr. Walt at the Mayo Clinic, where Dr. Walt delivered the Cooper lecture, named after Mrs. Cooper's late husband.

### The Weed System

Dr. Rosenberg used the Weed System for medical student education, developed by Dr. Larry Weed at the University of Vermont.<sup>2</sup> It broke down the level of difficulty of questions in such a way that the instructor could decide among a failure, a pass, or an honors.

By 1981, development of the Weed System was centered at the University of Illinois. Dr. Rosenberg wanted time off to go visit the Weed gurus

there. Dr. Walt said: "I'll do you one better" and arranged for the whole department to close up shop and go to Illinois, where we were the privileged recipients of a symposium on the Weed system. Alumni working in Detroit area hospitals covered our responsibilities while we were gone, as their way of giving back.

### Recuerdos de un Mentor

*Dr. David Spain*, who was to become president of the American Association for the Surgery of Trauma (AAST) in 2021 and acknowledged Dr. Walt as his mentor in his presidential address, came to Detroit in 1986 to deliver a lecture at Dr. Diebel's Detroit Trauma Symposium. He talked about a time when Dr. Walt ran the morbidity and mortality conference. David's assignment as a student was to make a class presentation on Alexander Fleming, one of the trio of giants (along with Joseph Lister and Ignaz Semmelweis) with whom, said Dr. Walt, every surgeon should be familiar.

Dr. Walt would expect the student assigned to present Lister to report that Lister almost sacked a lab supervisor who allowed his petri dishes to become contaminated with mold, killing his bacteria. The mold was *Penicillium*. It took another 40 years before Fleming discovered penicillin. What a terrible scientific gap!

*Dr. Donald Weaver*, our current chair, who passed through residency and attending under Dr. Walt, has commented that Dr. Walt's "rare combination of scientist, educator, philosopher, historian, and lover of the arts, widely read and full of wit, meant that there was rarely a time when he didn't sound like the smartest person in the room. His upbringing during apartheid in South Africa influenced his embrace of diversity, equity, and inclusion of everybody in his activities. He championed the minority. After him, it seems, they broke the mold."

<sup>2</sup> A fascinating Grand Rounds presentation by Dr. Weed can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/qMsPXSMtpFI>.



*Dr. Robert Wilson*, who became a globally recognized critical care surgeon and made contributions that have reflected greatly on Wayne State University, was another of Dr. Walt's great supporters. Whenever there was a problem in the department, Dr. Wilson was the one assigned to work on it. He had a tremendous love for Dr. Walt and quoted Dr. Walt himself as saying:

"Without a love for people, a doctor cannot function effectively for long and can never establish the requisite interpersonal relationships with patients. A genuine affection for patients is essential if one is to absorb ingratitude without anger, weariness without irritability, criticism without rancor."

*Dr. Scott Dulchavsky*, who was also a student resident and attending under Dr. Walt's chairmanship and is now the Chief of Surgery at Henry Ford Hospital, said that Dr. Walt "tolerated ignorance because it could be corrected by study. He was intolerant of poor grammar or personal appearance, as he was about shoddy patient care. Many a resident had a tie straightened or an offer for reimbursement for a barber visit."

He also recalled that "when a student wore surgical booties out of the OR, Dr. Walt would kneel at their feet to remove them. I remember one resident who was about 6' 2" tall. Dr. Walt told him to sit down and then he went to remove his booties. The resident tried to push Dr. Walt away but Dr. Walt pushed him back in the chair and said 'You sit there!' and went ahead and removed his booties." Dr. Dulchavsky pointed out: "This indiscretion was rarely repeated."

Dr. Dulchavsky had enough vivid memories to fill (with some help from Dr. Seymour Schwartz, another well known surgeon) a book which I highly recommend to those who would like to know more. It's really an excellent text.<sup>3</sup> (Figure 11)

*Dr. Lucas*: I myself recall when a strong willed, good surgeon called Dr. Peter Baute was the night chief. He worked from 6pm until 7am, Monday through Saturday. One night, a young man presented with a precordial stab and a positive Beck's Triad. He was rapidly resuscitated, with no endotracheal tube like we do nowadays, but there was a problem. The patient was a prisoner and was chained to the cart. He was hypotensive and needed operation. So Pete cut off the handcuffs with rib-cutters, fixed his right ventricle, and the patient did well.

When he reported to me in the morning what had happened, I said: "You did *what*?" Soon, I got a call from Dr. Walt's assistant telling me to bring Dr. Baute to Dr. Walt's office at two o'clock.

When I called Pete, he had just gone to bed and he really chewed me out for waking him up and said he was going to give the boss a piece of his mind, I said: "Pete, before you do that, I want you to know that he's already received a piece of many other minds, including the OR director, the hospital director, the mayor's office, the police chief at Receiving, the precinct chief, and the chief of police for the city of Detroit. So think about how big a piece of mind you want to give."

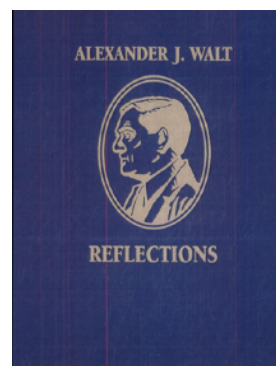


Fig. 11: *Alexander J. Walt: Reflections*  
Scott Dulchavsky  
and Seymour Schwartz

<sup>3</sup> Available as a hardcover at <https://www.amazon.com/Alexander-Walt-Reflections-Seymour-Schwartz/dp/0814328318>. A substantial pre-view was available as of September 2022 at [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Alexander\\_J\\_Walt\\_Reflections/FSK9VN8QnWIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Alexander_J_Walt_Reflections/FSK9VN8QnWIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover).

Pete went in very apologetic. He came out very excited and was happy he made the trip, because at the end of a stern lecture, as Pete was getting ready to leave, Dr. Walt said: "Pete, between you and me, I'd do the same."

*Dr. Jack Pickleman* remembers his first presentation at the Western Surgical Association, on the topic of trans-hepatic drain for liver injury. Dr. Walt was nationally recognized and as a result was often asked to comment on papers presented at national meetings.

When called upon to comment on Dr. Pickleman's presentation, Dr. Walt rose slowly to his feet, dressed in his pinstripe suit as always, and in his South African accent gently praised Jack for his hard work. But then went on to vivisect Jack's conclusions and, as Jack put it, "set back the care of liver injury by 50 years."

The audience loved it, but Jack was so destroyed by it that he had to go seek psychotherapy from his wife Brenda.

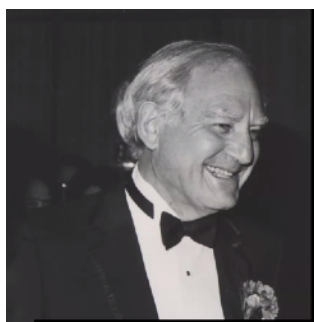


Fig. 12: Dr. Walt at a Western Surgical Association Annual Meeting banquet

### Honors

Dr. Walt received many teaching awards, including the staff award for Best Student Teacher in 1964, 1968, and 1970 and Commencement Speaker in 1978 and 1988. He received resident recognition every year at graduation. He was one of a number of surgeons in the department of surgery who received the Weiner award given

by the WSU Alumni Association for non-alumnus contributions. He received the Distinguished Service Award in 1988 and he received the highest award that university has to offer for his national and international contributions. He became a member of the Academy of scholars in 1990.

### At Leisure

Jack Pickleman and his wife Brenda were great friends of the Walts and they often traveled together. On their trips, his athletic prowess was redirected to dancing with Brenda—he was an expert in practically all forms of social dancing.

Their trips—official and unofficial—were always combined with cultural events. In 1994 Dr. Walt was president of the American College of Surgeons and attended the American Hellenic Congress with past presidents Lloyd MacLean and David Murray, and a future president, Brent Eastman. (Figure 13.)



Fig. 13: Irene and Alec Walt with Brent Eastman aboard the Aegean Dolphin

They went on cultural excursions to the Greek mainland to visit the Parthenon, temple to Athena; Delphi, where the Oracles originated; the temple of Poseidon on Sounion in southern Greece; the Temple of Artemis and the Celsus Library, dating to 117 AD, in Ephesus; the Knossos Palace in Crete, dating back to the Minoan

Period in 2000 BC; Santorini Island—the volcanic rock that gave rise to the legend of Atlantis; and to Rhodes to visit the famous Colossus.

### Breast Cancer

Dr. Walt had a special interest in breast cancer. In his address to the 1990 National Cancer Institute conference, he noted that though breast conservation was improving, it was not improving rapidly enough. In Michigan in 1983, only 10% of breasts were conserved. It had risen to 27% by 1987, but in Europe and Canada, it was over 75%. He noted that “taboos fade more slowly in some countries”... namely, the USA. He stated that although 30% of palpable suspicious shadows on mammogram were malignant, they were early—a far cry from the Halsted’s lesions which were huge fungating lesions. “Time,” he said, “was well past appropriateness that American women should be having conservative therapy and not total mastectomy.”

As in so many other areas, Dr. Walt was way ahead of his time with regard to breast conservation. The Alexander J. Walt Comprehensive Breast Center within the Karmanos Cancer Institute pays tribute to his efforts.



Fig. 14: Plaque of the Alexander J. Walt Comprehensive Breast Center at the Karmanos Cancer Institute

Next to the plaque by the entrance to the Breast Center is his portrait as president of the American College of Surgeons, only the second Michigania to have received that honor. (Figure 15, next page.)

### Family Legacy

As you might expect, Alec’s children have all done well. Steve earned a PhD at the University of Chicago and a law degree from Yale, and he is currently the Percy Brown Jr. Professor and Chair at the University of Virginia. John is a very busy practicing attorney in Southeast Michigan. John’s son Aaron is a medical student in New York, and Jack recently completed a degree at the Ross Business School at the University of Michigan.

Lindsay, who worked with Irene on the beautification program at the old Receiving Hospital, is a professional artist at the High Noon Gallery in New York. She has had many solo exhibits and has worked in many collections in the northeastern United States. Their daughter Eve is involved in international relations at SUNY and is a consultant for social impact partnerships.

### Conclusion

Despite the tragedy of his family’s early history in Eastern Europe, Dr. Walt had the good fortune to be exposed to fairness, love, respect for others, the work ethic, appreciation of the outside world, and the dynamics of culture. He recognized the evils of apartheid. He emphasized the importance of equality for everybody.

The result was a marvelous historian, philosopher and educator.

\* \* \*

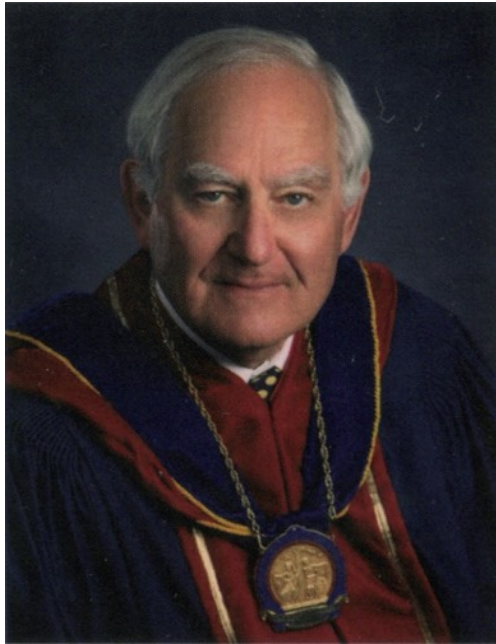


Fig. 15: President of the  
American College of Surgeons, 1995