



An anesthetist of a different Order

Lynne Cohen

When Dr. Earl Wynands moved to the front of Rideau Hall in October to become a member of the Order of Canada, he walked slowly and steadily, and those watching did not even realize that he is legally blind.

But being named to the Order was simply another in the list of accomplishments for this 68-year-old anesthetist, whose sight began to deteriorate when he was 20 because of macular degeneration. Undeterred, he went to medical school at McGill on a scholarship from the Royal Montreal Golf Club. He chose a career in anesthesia because of the variety of disciplines it involved, becoming a protégé of Dr. Harold Griffith, a father of anesthesia in Canada. “We always talk of anesthesia before and after Griffith,” explains Wynands. “He told me what to do and I did it.”

The specialty also appealed, he adds, because “I was impressed by how sharp practising anesthetists were.”

A Montreal native, he began making his name when he published a ground-breaking paper on coronary artery disease and anesthesia in 1967. He also initiated Canada’s first professional assistance program for physicians with disabilities, and by the time he retired he had become chair of anesthesia at the University of Ottawa and was former chief of anesthesia at both the Civic Hospital and the Ottawa Heart Institute (OHI). Following his “retirement,” he established a patient care simulation centre at the OHI. There, medical students face simulated emergencies before being

forced to deal with the real thing.

Since the mid-1950s, Wynands has gone through 12 tape recorders; Mary, his wife of 44 years, has read endless volumes of medical journals to him. “She is 51% of this partnership,” says Wynands, who practised at Montreal’s Royal Vic for 30 years before arriving in Ottawa in 1988.



Earl Wynands receives the Order of Canada from Governor General Romeo LeBlanc

He came to the capital at the invitation of the OHI’s executive director, Dr. Wilbert Keon.

Asked what kept him motivated through the difficult years as his eyesight deteriorated, he credits a type A personality and a family that includes 6 children.

And a genuine love of anesthesia. “You can do so much for people,” he says, “whether they are having minor or very major surgery, or anything in between. You provide pain relief and you make it possible for surgeons to carry out very complex operations. You gain a very large amount of control over physiology by using pharmacology.”

He has been legally blind for more than 15 years, and even though he has

sometimes felt sorry for himself he never seriously considered quitting his specialty. “I knew I was very good at my job and I had help whenever I needed it. I always had a technician or a resident with me during operations, so I knew the patients were not at risk because of my eyesight.”

The fact that patients seldom express gratitude toward their anesthetist has never bothered him. “The good feelings for me comes from within, from knowing what I have done for that patient.”

And even though patients might not realize that many life-saving procedures exist only because of advances in anesthesia, he maintains that this fact makes the work “very satisfying.”

In addition to doing clinical anesthesia and research, Wynands was president of the Canadian Anesthesiologists’ Society in 1974–75 and president of Society of Cardiovascular Anesthesiologists in the US from 1989 to 1991. He was also associate editor of the *Journal of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Anesthesia* for a decade, until 1996.

“At one time I had 5 jobs,” says Wynands, “including doing clinical anesthesia in the OR.”

And as he did his work, he made an excellent impression on colleagues. “Earl is a fantastic gentleman,” says Dr. Tofy Mussivand, the OHI’s director of cardiovascular devices who appointed Wynands to his current position as acting director of the simulation centre. “He has dedicated all his life to patient care and the education of doctors. I am fortunate to be associated with him.” ?