Leslie Harrell Pierce, MD (1913-2001)

Leslie Harrell Pierce, MD, founder of the Retina Clinic at The Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute, Baltimore, Md, and noted retinal surgeon and teacher died of heart failure at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center on January 18, 2001.

Dr Pierce was born on November 19, 1913, in Sunbury, NC, where his father ran a small country store. Harrell was educated in local schools and worked in his father's store during his teenage years. Early on, Harrell aspired to a military career and attended Oakridge Military Academy in North Carolina before receiving an appointment to West Point in New York. Unfortunately for Harrell at the time, he failed the physical examination owing to a chronic childhood asthmatic condition, thus ending his hopes for an army career. Not to be deterred he entered the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va, and through the guidance of family and professors turned his attention to a career in medicine. Harrell graduated in 1935 Phi Beta Kappa and entered Harvard Medical School in Boston, Mass, where he received his MD degree in 1939.

At this point Harrell decided to apply for a rotating internship and because his asthmatic condition had improved during his years in Boston, he sought a position that was not too far south. Fortunately his selection brought him to the University of Maryland in Baltimore. Here he met Dr Maurice Pincoffs the noted internist who prevailed upon Harrell to study internal medicine. Following a chief residency in medicine Dr Pierce entered private practice in Baltimore which he continued for the next 5 years. During this time he became interested in ophthalmology and sent in an application for a residency position to Dr Alan C. Woods the director of The Wilmer Institute. He was accepted and began his training in 1948.

Dr Woods soon tapped Harrell to become a future chief resident, which meant that he must select a subject of study for a preceding fellowship. It was at this time that the late S. Rodman Irvine was a visiting professor at Wilmer, and it was he who suggested to Drs Pierce and Woods that Harrell should seek a position with Dr Charles L. Schepens who had recently started a fellowship program on his Retina Service at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Harrell spent 7 months with Dr Schepens in 1951 before returning to Wilmer where he became chief resident in 1952.

Dr Woods built the Retina Clinic for Dr Pierce and thus the first retina service outside Boston was begun. In 1959, I joined Dr Pierce as codirector and for the next 25 years we shared in the teaching of both residents and fellows. Dr Pierce retired in 1984.

Harrell is remembered as the consummate retinal surgeon—precise, methodical, and untiring. His reports were detailed and his examinations thorough. He was known as a stickler for detail. During his career he performed over 6000 retinal detachment procedures with unexcelled surgical skill. In addition to his teaching at The Wilmer Institute, Dr Pierce participated in a retinal detachment course at the American Academy of Ophthalmology for many years. Dr Pierce was a member of many societies that included The Retina Society where he was a charter member and its third president in 1972-1973, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Medical Association, the Lister Medical Society, and the Club Jules Gonin. In 1997 Dr Pierce received the Distinguished Service Award from The Wilmer Institute.

Dr Pierce met his first wife at William and Mary; they wed at the end of his first year of medical school. She died in 1962. In 1972 he married the former Lesley Richardson, who survives him. In addition he is survived by 3 children, 2 stepchildren, and 13 grandchildren.

Dr Pierce was buried on June 24, 2000, in a small cemetery in Sunbury, in the Pierce family plot. A memorial service was held on February 3, 2001, at Grace United Methodist Church in Baltimore and a second memorial was held at the Wilmer Meetings on April 28, 2001.

Harrell Pierce will long be remembered for his contribution to our Wilmer heritage and to the field of retinal detachment surgery.

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