In Memoriam: Melvin G. Alper, MD (1921-2013)

Ronald S. Fishman, MD

Melvin G. Alper, MD, died on February 23, 2013, at the age of 91 years after several disabling episodes of cerebrovascular disease. Dr Alper grew up in the small town of Wytheville in the south Virginia piedmont. He attended the University of Virginia for undergraduate as well as medical study, receiving his medical degree in 1945. After an internship, he obtained 2 years of residency training in general surgery, experience that he found useful later for his special interest in orbital disease. Finishing a tour of duty in the US Air Force, he took his ophthalmology residency at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital from 1951-1954.

Coming to Washington, DC, Alper built a large private practice of ophthalmology, while maintaining a continuing role in clinical research and teaching at the Washington Hospital Center and George Washington University, particularly in neuroophthalmology and orbital disease. For much of this career, he was recognized as one of the most astute and distinguished clinicians in the entire Washington area. He immediately recognized the unique merits of the just-emerging technology of computerized tomography and published in early 1973 what was probably the first study of its use in orbital disease. In the 1960s, he cofounded, organized, and led a monthly teaching program in neuroophthalmology, bringing area ophthalmologists, neurologists, neurosurgeons, and neuroradiologists together in discussions that became and remain the main feature of advanced neuroophthalmologic education for the entire Washington, DC, medical community. He published more than 50 articles, book chapters, and book reviews during his active 41-year career, as well as participated in more than 100 formal lectureships and visiting professorships, a total made more impressive by his simultaneous private practice. In 1975, he was admitted to membership in the American Ophthalmological Society with a thesis describing changes in the anterior segment of the monkey eye after trigeminal nerve sections.

Alper’s career spanned the period when leadership in American ophthalmology was expanding from its base in a relatively few institutions to its present dependence on many large full-time academic departments with multiple subspecialists. His career illustrates what can be accomplished outside of full-time academia by particularly dedicated and gifted clinicians.

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