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Blair Justice

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Doctor Retires From

"RELIGION" OF SURGERY

BLAIR JUSTICE

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Last Tuesday, Dr. Joe White, a surgeon for 39 years, performed his final operation.

All men, when they retire from a job they have done well, leave some part of themselves behind. A surgeon, as Dr. White once said, leaves a religion.

It's a religion in the sense that it requires total commitment and it provides a man with a mission in life. The mission, to use Dr. White's word, is to "rescue" people — rescue them from sickness and, in some cases, from impending death.

A doctor learns from the people he rescues. Since that day 55 years ago when Joe White, a wide-eyed adolescent, assisted a Brady doctor in a kitchen table operation, he has seen a number of people undergo surgery. Many of those who faced critical operations showed courage and fortitude. Some had no formal religion.

But all convinced Dr. White that there is a part of man, perhaps the most important part, that is not physical. No surgeon can cut it out or even find it in the human body.

"It's the soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it," Dr. White said.

Richard Joseph White, Yale graduate, M.D. from Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons, formulated his philosophy toward life not

only from what he experienced as a doctor but also from what he read as a man always interested in English literature.

From Robert Louis Stevenson he remembered that gentleness and sincerity in a person inspire gentleness and sincerity in those around that person. This he observed time after time in patients who, showing an undemanding, cooperative manner, converted even the crustiest of nurses and busiest of doctors.

In the nearly two-score years that Dr. White has been a surgeon, he also has observed that people now are more realistic about what they think doctors can do for them. They are better informed, he said.

Seldom does a surgeon now encounter a patient such as one whom Dr. White will never forget. The man had only an injured hand but he asked, before entering the operating room at St. Joseph Hospital, if he could say a prayer. Dr. White said certainly, not realizing that the man had once been a camp town evangelist and when he said prayers, he yelled them. The halls of the hospital reverberated with the patient's voice as he invoked God's help. The prayer ended with: "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do."

Since Dr. White began practice in 1924, surgery has moved into treatment of parts of the human body that was just a dream of earlier doc-

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tors. In recent years heart surgery has flourished. Now, even transplanting of organs from one person to another is being done.

Dr. White has left these advances to "the boys," the younger surgeons who have come along. The surgery he did, with respected competence, was in the abdomen, the breast, the thyroid region.

Inevitably, the enemy he often battled was cancer. Surgery has extended the life of many a cancer patient. It will continue to save many more. But Dr. White has his doubts about a basic cause and cure being found.

Cancer comes from life itself, from cells that make up the human body. It is uncontrolled growth of cells. Dr. White looks upon the "life processes" as being "too subtle" for man ever to unravel, for researchers to find the basic mechanisms of cell growth and its control. He recognizes the fact that many authorities disagree with him.

The terminal cancer patient is not the only kind who weighs heavily on a surgeon. All doctors at some time are confronted with a patient beyond hope who can be kept alive only with tube feeding and transfusion.

Dr. White's practice has been to advise the family that it is "wrong" to keep a hopeless patient alive by these means. "If there is any chance of salvaging the person, or rescuing him, then certainly every means should be used. But when it is hopeless, the patient should be allowed to die with peace and dignity."

Dr. White tells the story of an old doctor who came home one day

after having a chest pain while making hospital rounds. When he arrived home he had a crushing pain in the chest and all the other symptoms of a severe heart attack. He told his family: "I'm going to go over there to the couch and lie down and die. I don't want any fuss or confusion." The doctor lay down, and he died.

Such control over what one does is not possible for all. But in one sense, Dr. White thinks a surgeon has control over his competency. He can retire before he loses it.

"Twenty years ago I decided that a surgeon ought to quit when he reaches 70. I found this worked out just about right for me, because I feel that I am retiring while I still am competent."

Dr. White will be 70 Tuesday. On Dec. 1 he will lock up the office he has occupied for 31 years in Suite 1214 of the W. T. Wagoner building and go home. He and his wife plan to make a trip to Europe next spring. They live at 316 Crestwood Dr.

Dr. White has been the leader in a number of professional organizations. He is a former President of the Tarrant County Medical Society. He was the doctors' Gold Headed Cane Award winner in 1953. He was president of the Texas Surgical Society and chief of surgeons for the Fort Worth & Denver Railway. He was chief of surgery at St. Joseph Hospital for 15 years.

Like Ulysses, whom he has been known to quote, Dr. White has been "part of all that I have met."