



Clayton E. Wheeler Jr. 1917–2007: The Early Years as Teacher, Clinician, and Scientist

Clayton Wheeler accompanied Edward Cawley to Charlottesville, Virginia, from the University of Michigan in 1951 when Dr. Cawley assumed the chair of the Department of Dermatology at the University of Virginia. It was there that he met his wife, Brooks, and started his family.

I consider it one of the most fortunate elements of my professional career to have had Clayton Wheeler as a mentor, adviser, and close personal friend from the very outset as I began my residency at the University of Virginia, where Clayton was one of my two professors, the other being Dr. Cawley, the department chair.

It was evident to me from the beginning that Clayton was a dedicated teacher, a compassionate and skilled clinician, a scholar, and a tireless investigator, but in addition he was a very approachable individual and a wise advisor. I was very fortunate to have had an opportunity to assist Clayton

in his laboratory, and he was always ready to offer advice and stimulation, largely through his own enthusiasm for his research.

One of his colleagues in another department once said to me, “Clayton never bought a wooden nickel”—Clayton’s entire career was a tribute to his superb judgment and unflinching common sense.

Clayton was a modest and unassuming individual with a sly wit, a hearty chuckle, and a wonderful sense of humor, and so it was easy to overlook at first the fact that he possessed the skills, ambition, and creativity that made him one of the truly great leaders in our specialty. I recall with gratitude many of the times I went to Clayton for advice, and he never failed to set me on the best path.

One could not wish for more interesting and delightful companions than Clayton Wheeler and his wife, Brooks, who, like Clayton, was a truly delightful and down-to-earth friend to both my wife and me.

Peyton E. Weary

Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2007) **127**, 1842. doi:10.1038/sj.jid.5700982

Clayton E. Wheeler Jr.: The Early Years at the University of North Carolina

This is a brief story of how one man built a top-notch academic department of dermatology from scratch. When Clayton Wheeler came to the University of North Carolina (UNC) in the winter of 1962, there was no residency program, no research in dermatology, and only modest facilities for either clinical or research dermatology. Clinical dermatology was being provided by two part-time clinicians, Joe Hitch and George Crane, who graciously came to the University Hospital to see dermatology consults one or two half days per week. Dick Dobson had left the previous year to join his mentor, Wally Lobitz, in founding a new department at the University of Oregon. In a talk given on the 50th anniversary of dermatology at UNC in 2002, Dr. Wheeler described his coming to the university

as follows: “I came to UNC in 1962 because I thought I could help develop an excellent dermatology program here. I was offered and promised very little and asked for very little because I thought the young Department of Medicine had little more to give. Essentially, I came on faith—faith in myself that I could do a good job and faith in the people at UNC that they would support dermatology if I did a good job.”

At the outset, dermatology was a division of medicine, with Dr. Wheeler as the division chief and sole full-time faculty. Some of his first efforts were to establish a residency program and a dermatology clinic with the continued assistance of Drs. Hitch and Crane. Dr. Wheeler brought two research grants for the study of herpes simplex virus with him from the University of Virginia. He applied for and received a research training grant. The research training grant and the research grants “kept us going” during

Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2007) **127**, 1842–1844. doi:10.1038/sj.jid.5700976

the early 1960s. Together they provided about \$100,000 per year in NIH funds, “more than all the other support put together.” The research training grant was of critical importance in getting dermatology started and in its progress during the early years. Although the training grants had not been devised for this purpose, they were very important in helping establish many dermatology departments at a time when other support was hard to come by (Wheeler *et al.*, 1972). They provided faculty and resident/fellow salaries, research starting funds, and some administrative and technical support.

Through his services on several advisory committees, including the Armed Forces Epidemiological Board, Clayton came to believe that dermatology needed to develop “centers of excellence” to foster the continued development of the specialty. In 1967, he wrote to James Shannon, then director of the National Institutes of Health, to suggest the establishment of centers of excellence in dermatology supported by the NIH. Clayton outlined in detail the composition and function of the centers. The letter was never answered, but an NIH-sponsored centers program was established 25 years later that was similar to that recommended in the letter. In any event, the letter to Dr. Shannon seemed to crystallize Clayton’s thinking about the future directions of dermatology at UNC. Undaunted, he determined that his goal and, as he later described it, his impossible dream would be to develop a center of excellence at the university. Initially, “although I had in the back of my mind that dermatology might someday become a separate department in the school, nothing was said about becoming a department.” Moreover, the dean and the chairs of medicine and surgery at that time were opposed to the development of new departments. Clayton realized that many potential benefits might accrue from departmental organization. For example, recruitment and retention of faculty was a problem during the initial years due in part to the low salary and benefits structure of the Department of Medicine. In addition, it would be easier for dermatology to “get more research grants, to do a better job in the clinics, to get a better share of available space and to have more control of its funds.”

In 1967–1968, the quest for departmental status was begun in earnest. By then the leadership in the school had changed, as had the strong opposition to the development of new departments. Anesthesiology and ophthalmology were trying to separate from the Department of Surgery, and neurology and dermatology wanted to break away from the Department of Medicine, so the local environment was less resistant to change than before. Nevertheless, it was an uphill battle all the way. An ad hoc committee to review and advise on the issue reported favorably. Support was obtained from the dean and other department chairs, and finally in a vote of the School of Medicine faculty. Clayton was the driving force behind all these developments. By 1970, administrative clearance had been obtained for dermatology to become a department, although another two years were needed to work out the details, including allocation of space and faculty appointments. In July 1972, the



Dr. Wheeler at the time of his arrival in Chapel Hill—approximately 1962.

Department of Dermatology at UNC was established, with Clayton Wheeler as its first chairman. This proved to be pivotal in the development of dermatology at UNC. The faculty members who subsequently became the backbone of the department were recruited during this early departmental period. They included Drs. O’Keefe, Gammon, Sams, and Woodley in investigative dermatology and Dr. Tomsick in the surgical area. With a place at the table, dermatology was able to obtain new research and clinical space. In many ways the 1970s and 1980s were a great time to be in medicine. With expanding budgets for research and clinical services, dermatology was positioned to take full advantage of the opportunities as they arose.

The impossible dream of creating a center of excellence at UNC came true. Importantly, excellent patient care has been provided to the people of North Carolina, including specialty areas of pediatric, medical, and surgical dermatology. The department has also had a significant impact on investigative dermatology (Dubin and Arndt, 1996), especially in the areas of virology, genetic and autoimmune blistering diseases, and cell–cell and cell–matrix adhesion. More than 140 residents and fellows have been trained in the department. Many of them became leaders in dermatology on the local and national scenes. Many became faculty members in academic departments of dermatology engaged in the training of the next generation of dermatologists. Eight are or have been chairs of departments or divisions of dermatology.

Teaching of medical students and residents was always a strong emphasis of Clayton’s, and in the period after his retirement as chair it was his primary interest. Just prior to his death he was honored by the university with its prestigious Award for Lifetime Achievement in Teaching and Mentoring.

Looking back on the story now with the successful outcome known, it is easy to see how it could have happened, but at the time the outcome was not at all clear. Clayton

IN MEMORIAM

Wheeler made it happen. Through his hard work, dedication, and personal excellence as a teacher, investigator, administrator, and clinician, he demonstrated that dermatology was worthy of full partnership in the School of Medicine. In the end, his faith in the institution and in himself proved valid. The Department of Dermatology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill is one of his most significant legacies.

Al Briggaman

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

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Remembering Clayton E. Wheeler Jr.

It was with a tremendous sense of loss that I learned the sad news of the death of Clayton E. Wheeler Jr., who passed away in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on 4 February 2007. The Tarheel family mourns the departure of our friend and leader. His exemplary life was dedicated to the education of generations of medical students and dermatology residents over the past six decades.

Clayton was born on 30 June 1917, in Viroqua, Wisconsin. After obtaining his MD from the University of Wisconsin in 1941 (AOA), he entered the residency programs in medicine (1942–1948) and dermatology (1948–1951) at the University of Michigan. He was board certified in medicine and dermatology in 1951. From 1951 to 1962 he served as assistant professor, associate professor, and professor of dermatology and chief of the Division of Dermatology at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Medicine. In 1972, he was appointed as the first professor and chairman of the newly created Department of Dermatology at the university, a position he held until 1987, when he became Professor Emeritus. He was most recently honored with the UNC Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement, in 2005. Clayton was a researcher, educator, and superb clinician. He actively worked in patient care until 2002 and in the teaching of dermatology to residents and medical students until 2004. During 2005 he returned to the department to review skin-disease slides with residents and medical students. He was the author of more than 150 publications, book chapters, and two books.

As a national leader in dermatology, Clayton was president of all the dermatological societies and received their major awards:

President, Society of Investigative Dermatology (1974–1975)

President, Association of Professors of Dermatology (1975–1976)

President, American Board of Dermatology (1978–1979)

President, American Academy of Dermatology (1984–1985)

Rothman Gold Medal Award, Society of Investigative Dermatology (1979)

The Clayton E. Wheeler Jr. Distinguished Professorship, UNC School of Medicine (1991) (<http://carolinafirst.unc.edu/distprofs/wheeler.htm>)



Clayton Wheeler with UNC representatives Chancellor James Moeser and former Provost Robert Shelton honoring him with the University Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement.

[edu/distprofs/wheeler.htm](http://carolinafirst.unc.edu/distprofs/wheeler.htm))

Gold Medal Award, American Academy of Dermatology (1993)

Master's in Dermatology, American Academy of Dermatology (1993)

UNC School of Medicine and Medical Alumni Association Distinguished Service Award (1997)

University Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005), UNC at Chapel Hill

The last award is described by the university as acknowledging "a lifetime of contributions to a broad range of teaching and learning, particularly mentoring beyond the classroom. It rewards those who help students to develop and attain their full potential in important ways during and after their departure from campus. Dean Smith, long-time coach of the men's basketball team, was the first winner of the award and exemplifies the qualities that this award honors." Clayton was selected from among distinguished faculty across a multitude of departments, institutes, and centers of UNC–Chapel Hill who were nominated in 2004.

Clayton married Brooks Overton in Sanford, North Carolina, on 12 October 1952. They were married 53 years and had three daughters, Susan Brooks Wheeler Slaughter,