

# HPB Pioneers

## Dr Kenneth W Warren: 1911–2001



Kenneth Wayne Warren died at the age of 90 years on November 15 2001 at the Boston New England Baptist Hospital after an extended illness with prostate cancer.

Ken (as he was known to his friends) Warren was well known to all of the members of the IHPBA. To some he was a peer and colleague; to most he was an admired teacher, and to many he was a person they had read about who had made enormous contributions to the treatment of pancreatic disorders.

I was fortunate to first meet Ken nearly twenty years ago when, returning home from an IBA meeting, we happened to be sharing a flight. I of course knew of Dr Warren and much admired his work. At the time, I was a very junior consultant starting to present some of my research at international meetings. I was amazed when this man, whom I had admired from afar, approached me and asked whether it was alright for him to sit next to me, both in the departure lounge and on the flight. We were both flying at the back of the plane and, in the few hours of the flight, began a friendship.

I later came to appreciate that of course this was Ken Warren, the man. This was so typical of him: to approach younger colleagues, make them feel at ease and then impart very modestly some of his enormous knowledge, not only on pancreatobiliary problems, but also on the management of patients and their problems.

Ken Warren was born on July 26 1911, in Cardesville, Georgia. He was raised in a small town in Florida, but was proud of his Georgian background. A home town friend, senate representative, Claude Pepper, recommended that he pursue his college education at Harvard. His son, George H Warren, tells me that his dad may have missed becoming a pancreatic surgeon. He was accepted to the Harvard Law School to begin studies in the autumn of 1938. He took the necessary pre-medical sciences and, during the summer of that year, changed his mind. He called Harvard Medical School to see if he could change his registration to the Harvard Medical School rather than the Law School. Harvard said 'no', so Ken went to Philadelphia to Temple University Medical School.



*Kenneth W. Warren – photograph taken by an artist patient*

He developed his interest in surgery during his surgical residency training at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan under Dr Roy D McClure. On completing his residency training in 1945, he joined the staff of the Lahey Clinic in Boston. There he developed a close relationship with such world renowned surgeons as Drs Frank L Lahey, Richard B Cattell and Samuel R Marshall. Ken rose to become department chairman of general surgery at the Lahey Clinic and chief of surgery at the New England Baptist Hospital. During his active years, he was a prodigious worker with operating schedules consisting of many major cases of patients who had sought his expertise from all over the country and all over the world. He was best known for his surgery on complex pancreatobiliary disorders. He wrote over 250 scientific surgical articles which were published in major surgical journals, and he published two surgical texts. He was visiting professor to most major medical centres in the United States and many centres around the world. He cherished his memberships of many international societies, and I know that IHPBA ranked very highly as one of his favourite societies. He was an honorary member of the IHPBA.

It was therefore a great honour and pleasure for me that, during my presidency of the IHPBA, we were able to establish the Kenneth W Warren Fellowship of the IHPBA. This was made possible by Ken's generosity and his wish further to foster research on the pancreas, biliary system and liver, but also to encourage the aspirations of young surgeons. He was also very keen that international interchange should continue and be fostered, hence the guidelines for the Fellowship which prescribe that the successful Warren Fellow would spend the year of their fellowship in a country other than their own. Prior to his death, our first Warren Fellow, Dr Tjarda Van Heek, was able to spend some days with Ken, and her tribute to him has already been published in the *Journal of Gastrointestinal Surgery*.

Although I had personally spent many hours speaking with Ken during our annual meetings at IHPBA or other pancreatobiliary meetings, of course I did not know him as well as his American colleagues with whom he had worked closely. Therefore, in writing this tribute to him, I approached them for anecdotes that would illustrate some aspects of Ken's life. I also approached his son, Dr George H Warren, to provide some insights for me, and I am very grateful to him as well as to Dr Charles Frey for providing me with some of the following information.

Undoubtedly Ken was a great story-teller: not only serious stories regarding his surgery and the care of patients, but also in a more humorous manner at functions such as the American Pancreas Club. The following is an anecdote which occurred in 1977 at the Pancreas Club meeting in Toronto. It is related by Dr Charles Frey:

"At 8 am everyone was registered and seated awaiting the first presentation. However, I had just been informed that the projection system was not functional and would not be fixed for 20 minutes. I looked out at a sea of expectant faces who were ready to proceed with our programmed presentations. Being an average extemporaneous public speaker with a limited array of jokes, it was going to be quite a chore for me to keep the audience entertained for 20 minutes.

Fortunately for the members of the Club in attendance at the meeting, I spotted Ken in the front row and whispered our plight in his ear. Almost as if it had been planned, after I announced to our members the situation with the projection equipment and that Ken had agreed to tell a few stories, Ken moved to the podium and told one rollicking joke and story after another. A common theme in his jokes were the foibles of the Kennedy clan, some of whom were his personal patients. The audience by their roars of approval, cheers and clapping made it clear Ken was a master of extemporaneous communication and, as Chairman of the meeting, had saved my butt!"

Some of the stories that Ken would have told at such meetings include the following:

Asked by a young lawyer at a dinner whether you can take out the whole pancreas: "Son, if you can't take it out . . . it's not there".

During his first weeks at Lahey, he was given an advanced colon tumour to operate on. "How did it go, Warren?". "It was a challenge but I was able to resect all of it". "Resected! Hell man, we sent you to bypass it".

Regarding pancreatitis, "operating too early and doing too much, and then operating too late and doing too little".

"I can manage the Boston Red Sox better than this guy".

"You don't have to be smart to be a doctor. If you ask the right questions, the patient will tell you what is wrong with him". His history-taking once discovered the pathogenesis of an echinococcal cyst in a 70-year-old dowager from Buenos Aires who presented to Lahey for treatment. The patient had never travelled beyond her penthouse and local shops. Every summer, however, she sent her pet poodle to a family sheep ranch in the mountains. Every winter, every night, she and the poodle shared one toothbrush."

“Every surgeon should read Franklin Dexter’s *Anatomy of the Peritoneum*, 1892. This book can be read in one evening. I want you to read it tonight and return it tomorrow”.

Finally I would like to conclude this tribute to an old friend with a quotation from a letter that was sent to Dr George Warren by a student nurse who worked with him in 1979. It again illustrates his affinity for young people and his humbleness and dignity. Like this nurse, I know that Ken Warren touched my life, as I am sure he touched many others.

“Above all, I will never forget how Dr Warren was with people. He could be found anywhere at any time in the hospital and for him no one was beneath his recognition. He would have coffee in the cafeteria with someone from the house-keeping staff, one of the nurses, someone from Respiratory. Dr Warren showed all people he interacted with, dignity and respect not only as a physician, but that was the person he truly was. I know that Dr Warren touched my life in this manner, as I am sure he touched many others.”

*J Toouli*

*Adelaide, Australia*